

I Reincarnated as a Noble Girl Villainess But Why Did It Turn Out This Way?

– Akuyaku Tensei Dakedo Doushite Kou Natta –

- Volume 3 -
“Depending”
Prologue

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〔 PART I 〕

CHAPTER 143

THE UNWRITTEN SIDE OF HISTORY, PART 1

The Great Plains east of Fort Jugfena has witnessed warfare for the past six years.

First, there was a small defensive battle that the royal capital's practically forgotten about already, one which I participated in with my shabby domain army consisting of a mere fifty soldiers.

Almost as if it's a joke, it's now known as the "hidden defensive battle," this skirmish has been buried in people's memories even though it was my first ever battle. In theory, this battle was also the first battle to start it all.

The Kaldia army currently consists of 250 soldiers. More than half of them are actually cavalry troops, which is extremely rare for such a small domain army, and when I turned 12 years old, we became incorporated into the royal knight troops' left flank formation.

-Eh, how odd. My army's supposed to be a border defense unit, acting as logistical support from the rear, isn't it? How did it become like this?



The Densel Dukedom army of the Rindarl Union, numbers approximately 30,000. As for the Arxian royal army, it can mobilize approximately 48,000 people.

The horde of people was so thick that the ground couldn't even be seen, and the sounds of weapons clanging, screaming, dying, gunpowder, and horses filled the air.

"Curses, what's with that arrow! Its sound and power is causing the soldiers' morale to drop, and the front lines of the central army are beginning to collapse!!"

In the middle of the Arxian army, a Shiru warrior who served as our direct messenger from the general commander was pacing back and forth and shouting from his horse. In response to his thick Artolan accent, I replied that he should calm down.

"The core of the central army's formation consists of the top soldiers in all of Arxia. They'll be able to fix the formation immediately. What's more -"

On the other side of where the infantry was doing battle, the sound of gunpowder was booming. This is the fifth battle already since the war has begun. Screams were piercing through the air, drowning out the roaring of our soldiers and causing the soldiers around us to visibly shrink back.

-These new 'arrows,' are they guns? I remembered back to six years ago when I managed to escape the fire caused by explosives at Fort Jugfena. If they were already researching explosives and gunpowder back then, it's well within the realm of possibility that Densel managed to invent the weapon known as a gun.

On a battlefield where swords, spears, and bows are supposed to be the primary weapons, if an unknown weapon suddenly appears that can kill instantly from a distance without any movements you can read, it's only natural that the soldiers who witness what bullets can do will fall into chaos. Just seeing it won't give them an understanding of how it works, they won't know when it can attack, and they can only hope the armor on their bodies manages to protect them from this unknown scary threat.

This is warfare in this world, it's something that can't be helped.

"...The northern flank's attack has deviated from its planned location. Both the enemy army, and our ally army are out of our effective communication range. This will be too dangerous if this goes on."

"I know, Oscar."

Oscar beside me gave me his advice on the current situation, and I worked my brain to its utmost limit thinking about the next move to take. I must make a decision in thirty seconds, I can't afford to take any longer than that.

Right now, my 250 member Kaldia army that's supposed to be acting as logistical and rear support, is camped out between the central army formation and the left flank, close to the front lines.

Even with the enemy formation's attack on the left, it's more chaotic than it should be, and right now dust is gently blowing in the opposite direction, toward the right side.

The fight is extending out far more than any of the Arxian royal army's troop formations. I can hear the sounds of the chaotic melee right behind me.

If we want to regroup and fix the formation, we'd have to retreat. However, the left flank army's melee has already spread to behind us to block our path, so we'd have to take another route. And I'm not sure how it happened, but it seems that we also happen to be in an excellent position to strike at the enemy army central formation's unguarded right flank.

“...It's time to make good use of this chance that the enemy army has given us, let's go cause chaos in the enemy troops that are using their new weapon.”

“Mmm, an interesting battle plan!”

After I firmed my resolve and decided on a plan of action, Claudia who was next to me smiled in expectation of going to battle.

“What are the new arrows like, Orben?!”

“It's a type of cylindrical tube, almost as long as a person is tall! It makes a huge sound, and any soldiers standing in front of it will be shot by it... It seems to fire invisible arrows!”

I ignored Claudia's overly excited voice that didn't belong on a battlefield, and focused on listening to the Shiru messenger soldier Orben's description of the enemy's new weapon. As I expected, Densel's new weapon is something I know of already, some type of gun.

“What is the known information on the enemy unit equipped with this weapon?”

“It seems to be a light infantry unit of about thirty enemy soldiers. After they fire their invisible arrows together, they return behind the cover of their heavy cavalry troops. Their heavy cavalry unit is a problem... they seem to be quite skilled at riding horses, like us.”

Similar in skill to the Shiru tribe, a nomadic group? The former Artolas Kingdom that was conquered and swallowed up by Densel, used to have countless nomadic tribes living in it during the past. Perhaps some of them are now working for Densel.

“I think that their new weapon is probably unable to carry out rapid fire attacks like a bow can. It takes time and effort to reload that barrel weapon with new ammunition. That’s why they always have to take the trouble of retreating back into their formation. ...The next time they appear, I’m going to aim for a surprise attack on them.”

“How do you plan to do this attack, do you have an idea, Eliza-sama?”

“...These long cylinders, are most likely weak to side attacks. I believe their cavalry troops are serving as the guards for that unit. It would be normal to think that Densel doesn’t want to lose the new weapons it just invented. Let’s use a light cavalry formation, and when they bring out their long-barreled weapons unit, how about immediately retreating and regrouping with the central army formation?”

Almost all of my light cavalry troops are Shiru warriors. For their ability as a cavalry unit, they should be top class in all of Arxia. ...I have confidence in them.

“Mmm. It should work as an effective distraction. Claudia-dono and Gunther can lead our remaining troops, and enter the melee behind us to assist our side.”

“Oscar, I would like you to join them as well. Depending on the circumstances, be flexible with the strategy as you see fit. I shall join the light cavalry troops together with Teo.”

“That’s... Dangerous. I should be the one with the light cavalry.”

I shook my head at Oscar, and patted the head of the huge draconis I was riding on. Rashiok proudly raised his nose, and slightly opened his wing without a sound, causing a light breeze.

“Do you remember who my partner is? If necessary, a draconis can run three times faster than a horse. What’s more, the enemy’s arrows are strongly destructive. This way, I can surely reduce the number of casualties.”

Oscar didn’t object any more. On the other side of the dust billowing about the field, I could see the enemy’s heavy cavalry formation opening up. There were a group of soldiers coming out from it.

“Alright then, let’s go! Do your best to live to tell the tale!”

CHAPTER 144

THE UNWRITTEN SIDE OF HISTORY, PART 2

I instantly arrived in front of the enemy soldiers before they knew what was going on. With a backhand grip on my halberd, I put strength into it as I slipped it through the wall of enemy spears.

A rain of blood was falling down. As the vanguard, I'm now completely covered in blood, and the soldiers that were following me will probably get drenched in red as well.

According to what my adopted father Ergnade told me, it's perfect if you get drenched in blood. Just like he said, the gaudy appearance from being splashed red in blood sent enemy soldiers running away from me.

As I remembered my teachings, I left things up to Rashiok's momentum while slicing off the head of an enemy's horse. A scream of anger that sounded like it came from the bottom of the stomach erupted from the rider on the now collapsed dead horse.

I could see the shadows of the gun-holding soldiers hiding behind the heavy cavalry troops, and I raised my halberd in preparation. I felt the heaviness of the halberd for a few seconds.

This makes five killed already. The ones that escaped will probably get cleaned up by my soldiers following me. I could still hear the explosive sound of gunpowder coming from behind. It wasn't the sound of a gun firing this time though, it was more like a gun jamming. Did one of their weapons explode I wonder, I suddenly heard what sounded like one of their weapons blowing up, then the thumps of several heavy objects falling to the ground.

Please let it be that my soldiers didn't get mixed up in it.

Anyways, dense formations are weak to side attacks. Their cavalry troops should have been arranged to protect the flanks, but were they prioritizing the encirclement of the large number of Arxian troops I wonder, they were arranged at the end of the left and right wings of their formation instead. The Rindarl side probably took many things

into account when protecting their gun unit, but it seems that they probably didn't calculate for my army's movements because we were supposed to only be a logistical support troop.

"Go ahead and rampage, Rashiok!!"

I turned my halberd against the soldier that came to try and stop me. Rashiok responded to my encouragement by roaring. The roar of a carnivorous beast has the power to instinctively cause people to shrink back in fear.

Together with a windstorm, my draconis crashed into a wall of people. Any spears that aimed for Rashiok merely bounced off his scales, or were broken by the impact, while the wall of people and horses before us was scattered so easily.

Ahhh, all the enemy soldiers were screaming. The heavy sound of all the horse hooves following me, turned into the screams of death. Metallic armor was left deformed, and an all too juicy crunch was heard by the sharp-eared among them.

"Withdraw! Meet up with the main army!"

I confirmed with a glance that behind me, the gun unit had been crushed as well. The enemy formation was in utter confusion. Their dense formation didn't take a side attack into consideration, getting confused because of this degree of attack is pathetic.

I rose my halberd into the air, and tilted it to the right. After seeing my signal, Teomer gave instructions for our soldiers in the back to withdraw as well. My superb light cavalry troops composed of mainly Shiru warriors instantly aligned their horses and started galloping together towards the right.

When I passed the combat area where the left wing had extended to, Claudia was there ahead of me.

"Go straight ahead! Now, we can pincer and surround the remaining enemy troops!"

"Alright, do it!!"

If she says this is the correct strategy, I made the snap decision to do as she suggested. As for the soldiers following me, Oscar speedily gave orders to each small team.

The Arxian soldiers that had been fighting were able to get relief from combat, and the Rindarl soldiers were driven away as if they were a flock of sheep that was being herded.

How many can I surround, I wonder? ...Roughly two or three hundred? Is it possible to make a strong encirclement with the same number of soldiers? Considering I'm also using a mix of light cavalry. I'm just a low-ranked commander, after all.

“Kill them all, don’t leave any small fry that are worthless as prisoners alive!”

Screams of stop it were rising from the enemies. My soldiers ignored them as they circled them from the outside with their spears and killed them with the positioning advantage.

The soldiers that were caught in a collapsed formation were helpless. The Rindarl soldiers on the inside had no ways to effectively attack, and were crushed by my soldiers on the outside. The enemy soldiers on their outside edges are pushed inwards, and cooperation with their fellow soldiers becomes impossible as their order falls into shambles.

“This is a one-sided slaughter with the advantage of cavalry! Arxians are such barbaric brutes! Have you forgotten the spirit of chivalry or humanity!!?”

As I killed a horse, the really muscular man who fell down from it was shouting at me. He happened to roll right in front of me. This man noticed Rashiok, and looked directly at me who was the rider. I saw astonishment in his eyes, followed by a mix of hatred and contempt.

“Get down from your horses and fight fair and square!! You coward, weak little kid!! If you have any pride as a knight, duel with me right here right now-”

The man who was barking at me got an expression like he saw something inconceivable in his last moments. Then, he realized that the sword I threw at him had pierced through his neck, and gurgled up a fountain of blood in place of his shouting. Then he finally collapsed onto the ground, and he stopped talking forever more.

“...What’s this so-called cowardice on the battlefield? The only thing there is, is death.”

As I spat that out, I jumped down from Rashiok. I approached the man’s corpse, to

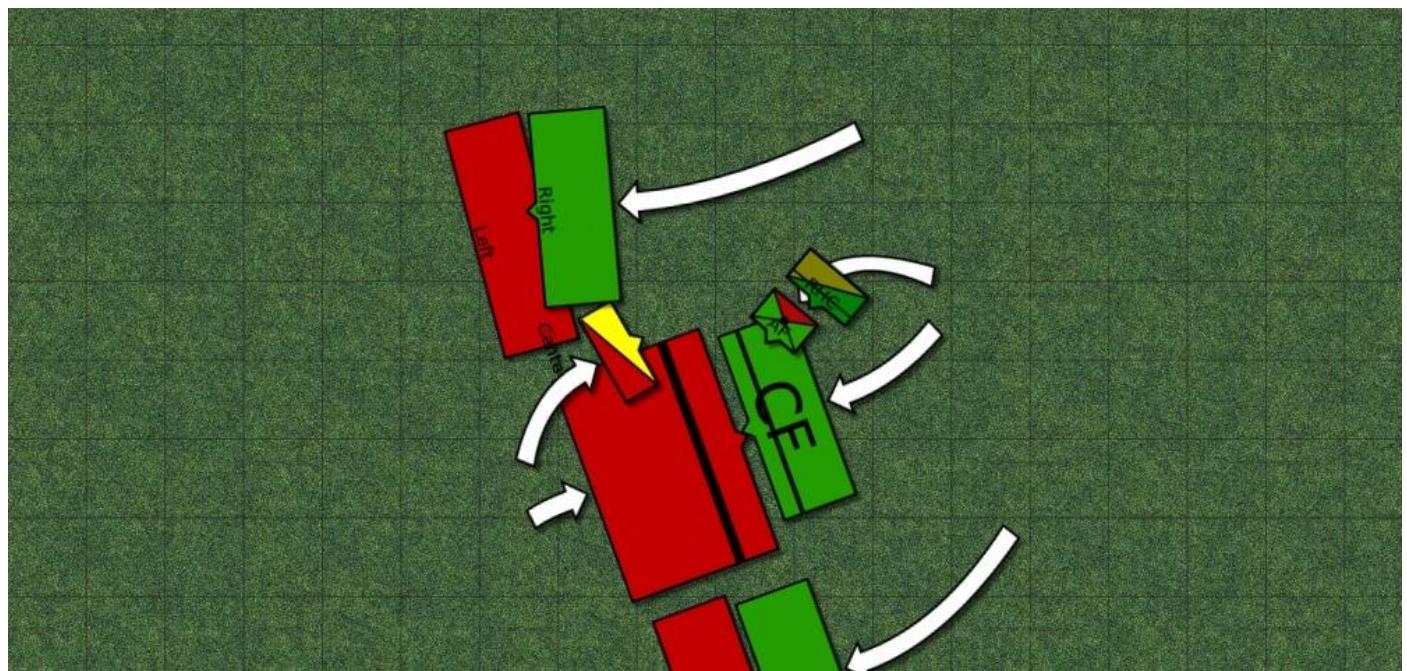
retrieve my sword.

When I noticed that his cloak was shining gold with the emblem of a high-ranked knight, I caught my breath. I am a domain lord, not a knight. Unlike this bastard, I wasn't raised with the chivalric spirit to begin with. And in the first place, there's no way I can acknowledge such a buff man shouting for a child to duel him as any sort of proper knight.

I pulled out my sword, and I used my halberd instead to cut off his head. Since he does seem to be a high-ranked knight, at the very least it will be useful to take his head with me. I'm in the frontlines of battle, after all. There's no such thing as too much reward money.

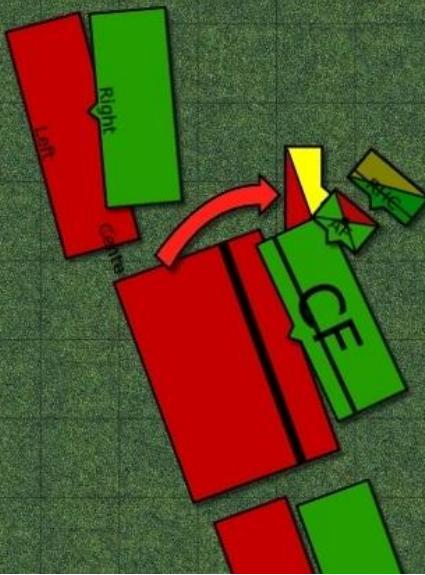
I wrapped his head in his cloak and tossed it to my soldiers to keep for the reward money, but I couldn't have known what it would end up causing at the time.

Battle of Jugfena Great Plain, The 5th battle in Rindarl Arxian War.

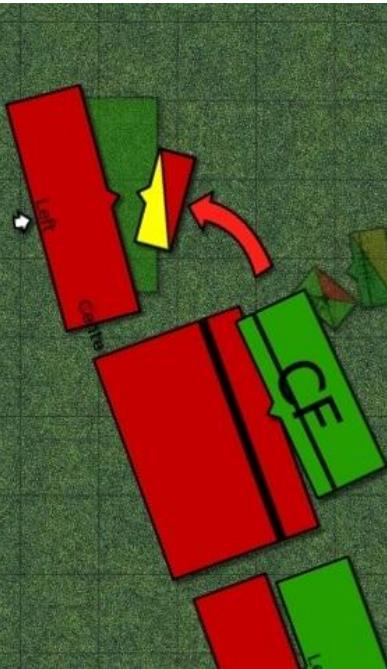


In Year 617 of Ar Xia calendar, a battle broke out between 30.000 strong Densel Dukedom army of the Rindarl Union and 48.000 strong Arxian Royal Army east of Jugfena fortress. The battle further intensified by the usage of new weapon by Densel "Arrow" formation.

The attack of Arxian left flank are countered and steadily pushed back by Densel right flank. The ensuing chaotic melee of the Northern formation continue to extend further nearing the central formation. Suddenly, Eliza Kaldia Einsbark and her 250 man logistic unit found themselves isolated behind enemies line.



The grim situation proved to be of beneficial nature. Presented by an ideal location to attack the exposed flank of Densel "Arrow" formation, Her Ladyship Kaldia ordered the charge. Lord Eliza herself led from the front, charging with her trusted draconis and halberd in hand. Suddenly plunged into melee Densel "Arrow" formation quickly destroyed by the Kaldian charge. The charge also put the Densel Central formation into disarray. Deemed satisfactory Lord Eliza called the charge off and signaled the retreat back to the Arxian army.



Seeing another golden chance, Knight Claudia Rolentsor advised to attack the rear of Densel right formation and surround the remaining enemies. Lord Eliza promptly accepted and ordered her knight's advice. The second charge that ensued quickly destroyed Densel right formation and routed their troop. In the middle of this encirclement Lord Eliza's acquired her first war achievement.

CHAPTER 145

AUDIENCE

...Just why is it that I'm standing here?

Trying to escape the reality that I was right in front of the throne of the royal palace, I glanced over at some of the highest-ranking knights in the kingdom, Marquis Rolentsor and Earl Einsbark.

His Majesty who was sitting there, I feel like he called my name just now, am I just hearing things?

...Unfortunately, I didn't seem to be hallucinating, as someone pushed me on my back. I staggered as I stepped forward, and just like that I was in front of the king.

“Go, and kneel in front of the king.”

Ergnade who was right behind me was whispering to me. I proceeded the rest of the way by myself, being unable to return even though he was just a few steps behind me. I kneeled as I was told to in front of the steps to the tall royal throne, from where the king overlooked me. I met the king's blue eyes for an instant before I looked down. Neither the king nor I had any expression of our feelings.

“Viscountess Kaldia. During this battle, you've made a splendid meritorious accomplishment. For your glorious achievement, I would like to reward you.”

“...Hearing so from Your Majesty directly, I'm grateful for the honor.”

While managing to squeeze out polite words required of me by etiquette, my voice sounded almost like a robot to myself, surprising me mentally with how calm I seemed to be. I'm in the presence of the person who holds absolute power over this entire huge kingdom, it's a strange atmosphere in which was fresher than I expected.

I understood that the king was the absolute representation of authority for both the church and the law in this country. I managed to drag this fact out of my mind somehow, as if I was a computer, although right now it all feels so far away from me.

Arxia's political system seems feudal at first glance, but the true situation is quite different. All of the actual power is held by the king, and he merely delegates power to his vassals. The royal domain system is probably the easiest to explain, it's similar to a Count Palatine from medieval Europe. Those that manage it receive a high noble rank from the king, which wouldn't be possible without the trust of both the king and the Upper House of Lords, and it's supposed to be a title that isn't hereditary.

The main reason that this system has successfully continued for the past 600 years without decaying is thanks to the existence of the church. The moral character of everyone in this country is guided by the Ar Xia church's Sacred Code. Committing a felony would cause you to be excommunicated from the church, and as for excommunication... those branded as heretics are savagely treated, almost inversely proportional to the modernity of the legal system for a fantasy world.

Well, at any rate, law and religion in this country haven't decayed, and it's been an effective system for a long period of time now.

I've gone off on a tangent. It seems that when my mind tries to escape reality, I can drift quite far off-topic.

...But anyways, did I really have such a great accomplishment on the battlefield? Indeed, I managed to disable their unit with the new weapons. But its power and shooting range is limited, and once the army knows exactly what kind of weapon it is, I'm sure that such a chaotic response won't happen again. And as for the enemy heavy cavalry unit, it wasn't entirely destroyed.

As for what I did after that, is this about surrounding the enemies on our overextended left flank and annihilating them? While that unit was indeed annihilated, such a thing should have been accomplished by Ergnade several times already in the previous battles. Divide and conquer. It's one of the most basic strategies in battle.

Among the enemies killed, there was that muscular soldier that seemed to be a high-ranked knight, but I doubt his head would have such a high price attached to it if he was at the frontlines himself like that.

Anyways, that was the only sentence the king spoke to me, as after that Marquis Rittergau, Earl Terejia's older brother who's still working despite his age, took over and read out my achievement and reward from some documents in an official tone of voice.

Although, I don't really understand what it is that I've achieved, since I wasn't paying attention. I don't have much military experience, and the only word that I really caught was head. I'll have to ask Ergnade later about what he meant.

In contrast though, the reward part was easy to understand. Basically, it was money, land, and ranking. ...I don't really want land or ranking though, I felt somewhat bitter about it. Right now, the new Pioneer village is just getting settled down in Kaldia, and my hands are full with the irrigation construction for the largely untouched eastern half of my domain.

Even if I receive new, unsettled land from the Jugfena royal domain, without receiving any human resources to go along with the land, this has no benefits for me. They're just giving me more land to match my promoted title.

At any rate, although I still don't quite understand why, I now have the rank of a lesser earl. How strange. Something like a promotion in noble rank shouldn't be that easy to obtain... I guess it can't be helped that I'm a bit confused, as too many unexpected things just fell into my lap.

As for the otome game that's supposed to begin when I enter noble school, that's coming up soon, later in autumn of this year that I'm twelve.

...But more importantly, one year ago, war between Arxia and Rindarl broke out, and it's a fact that I played an important role in this particular battle.

How is this battle going to affect the otome game, I wonder. I don't want the war to expand even more, as I'd have less time to take care of Kaldia, and it might be devastated or fall into disrepair due to the war. I finally managed to bring my domain back to a civilized level similar to the other domains – just how long did it take? It's been ten long years.

I absolutely won't stand for my ten years of hard work to go to waste, so the next chance I get, I think I should remove even more of Rindarl's soldiers.

...After all, it seems that I have an affinity for combat.

CHAPTER 146

IS IT A GOOD OR BAD EVALUATION?

The king's troops under his direct command joined the battle as well, and the scope of the lines of battle on the Jugfena Great Plains expanded even further.

Even though it was clear that the Rindarl side just suffered a major defeat, it seems that they rejected Arxia's request for them to surrender.

Apparently, Arxia captured over 600 Rindarl soldiers in the last battle. At a rough estimate, they had maybe 4,000 casualties.

Even with such a loss, and abandoning their captive soldiers to be executed, sending more troops at us again... I don't know what Rindarl, or I should be more specific, the Duke of Densel is thinking. But at any rate, the reason why they declared war on us was supposedly because it's a "protest against the unfair treatment of Rindarl noble blood," because of the exiling of the first prince, Albert, and his lost opportunity to attend noble school.

Arxia is also being Arxia. Even though they could have nominally registered Prince Albert as a student at noble school and avoided the bloodshed of its citizens, Arxia didn't do so.

I can't show any dissatisfaction to the king since he even sent his personal troops to the front lines, and since the Rindarl Union is a newly formed country, perhaps they don't want to back down for the sake of their reputation, is what I think.

...Although since I'm actually on the front lines, I can think whatever I want, but none of it will be of any help.

As for the sudden change in the situation, which put my army in the midst of combat, without being able to contact our allies, the attack that I planned caused about thirty of my soldiers to be injured, and six have died. Although I know that losses can't be avoided in battle... I hated myself, each of their deaths cut at me.

From among the dead soldiers, they included some that slept under the same roof as

me during my time in the barracks.

"Then, Earl Kaldia and her army, as well as her knights, will be in charge of defending to the north of Fort Jugfena, on the corner of the Bandishia Plateau known as the Ritox Plateau."

At the end of an overly long House of Lords meeting, when the overall commander of the Arxian Royal Army, Marquis Rolentsor, gave me my new command assignment, there was no way I could be happy about this even though I had no choice but to accept.

"...Understood."

Since I received such an unwanted promotion... My Kaldia army, I suppose it's Earl Kaldia's army now, at any rate, is now officially being deployed to the front lines as well. Even though my light cavalry troops should have been well suited for the role of logistical and rear support.

Ergnade gave me some information about this location in a low voice, telling me that the Ritox Plateau was a small plateau at the southwest of the larger Bandishia Plateau, and that it had a terrain which should be easily defendable by even a small number of soldiers.

If he says so, then it's probably true. It's a good thing that Claudia's distant relative seems to be a rational person when it comes to giving me a military assignment. Well, they're probably going to be more reasonable than what I can imagine, given the few knights I do know.

...Since I've received my orders, there's no helping it, let's take this chance to reorganize the command structure of my army so that no problems will occur. Since I'm going to be on the front lines, I can't just let most things run automatically anymore like logistics, which was mostly helping the troops resupply.

My personal messenger soldiers as well as strategist will be Oscar and his unit, Gunther will command my only infantry unit with no horses, and Agil will lead my heavy cavalry troops that we've been training ever since we were called to war.

Teomer will lead my light cavalry unit that consists of primarily Shiru warriors, while Claudia will lead the unit with the fewest soldiers, the light cavalry unit made up of

my domain's soldiers. Claudia's unit will be a mobile strike force, under my direct command.

Perhaps it seems strange that the main troops under my direct command will be the mobile strike force, but since I'm riding Rashiok who has the best mobility of all, there's no helping it. Besides, I'm not well versed in the strategies of warfare, so Oscar who has experience from his time with the Jugfena knights will be a more reliable leader for directing the infantry as he can come up with sound strategies.

"Your job isn't to mobilize and attack, but you need to prepare for defensive measures. Do you have anything in mind, **Countess Kaldia**?"

Just as I was impressed with Marquis Rolentsor for his being reasonable, another noble interrupted my thought process with his disdainful attitude typical of a priest noble. He went to the trouble of calling me a countess, the female title for an earl, putting extra emphasis on that word, I suppose it's a way to ridicule the knight attire I'm wearing.

Even I think that it's just lucky coincidence how I managed to get a promotion in noble rank, and since the Kaldia domain is well known for a bad reputation, this promotion was sure to earn the ire of some court nobles.

Although Marquis Nordsturm has been lying low as of late, even now the northern nobles will still secretly say annoying things in the shadows, such as how the way I annihilated the enemy was evidence of my father's cruel bloodline still alive in me, or that I was a demon girl who enjoyed bathing in blood.

Well, it's whatever, really. At any rate, I won't have to see them very much anymore when I'm in noble school. They probably just want to say how useless my answer about defensive measures will be, the rambling of the weak with no power trying to attack me, although honestly, they know nothing about just how cruel my father had been. In strange contrast to the anger in my stomach, my mind was working at a high pace.

Just then, a good idea appeared in my mind about how to decrease the enemy soldiers' morale. I suddenly remembered a ridiculous story about how a European noble named Vlad the Impaler from my previous world was infamous for using the atrociously brutal method of impaling his enemies. As always, memories would just suddenly pop into my head on their own.

“For my plan, can I ask that all of the prisoners taken that are scheduled to be executed anyways be given to me?”

“...The captured prisoners? Exactly what kind of strategy do you have in mind?”

I took a glance around me, and all the nobles seemed surprised. The noble talking to me hurriedly said “well, I think you should ask the general commander about that,” before turning around and returning to his seat as quickly as possible.

What's with that reaction?

In keeping with the expectations of the nobility, without losing a single soldier – I went to the trouble to think up such a wonderful strategy that will deal an incredible blow to the morale of the Densel army, which will almost certainly lead to their miserable defeat at our hands.

“You have a terrible expression on your face.”

Ergnade beside me was laughing as he said so.

“...Is that so?”

“I know perfectly well just how much you loathe Densel – take the captives with you. This time, crush them utterly.”

Ergnade's advice was usually merciless. It's only natural that my actions on the battlefield would imitate him, as it's all based on his teachings.

The impression you give others is really important. Although I don't mean important in the typical way, I want to leave a different type of impression.

CHAPTER 147

THE BATTLE OF RITOX PLATEAU, PART 1

In the first place, the Kaldia domain probably detests the Densel Dukedom more than any other domain would. Many of my citizens were former refugees forced to the brink by Densel, having lost many friends and family members, and I myself was also almost killed by them, so it's not strange at all that we would hate Densel.

I'll get to the point, though. Since we know better than anyone their lack of respect for human life, we'll kill them as well without hesitation. That's just how it is. If I see them, even if they try to escape, I will kill them. And since we're now at war – I'll lure them out, then kill them.

They're just unlucky. They should have given up and surrendered.



The extremely long battle lines extended far to the north and the south, the southern lines almost reached the Planates Dukedom's territory, while the northern lines reached even the sea, localized small battles were occurring everywhere.

Nonetheless, it's unreasonable for us to go through the Bandishia Plateau controlled by Densel and cross over the Amon Nor mountain range, and the northern sea is filled with icebergs that come down from the mountains, making it almost impossible to navigate. That's why the Great Plains is still the main location of battle, while most of the other defensive battles are concentrated in the Genas domain, the Jugfena royal domain, and the Red Forest near the Planates border.

The king's personal army is participating in battle on the Great Plains. Even though we're supposed to be fighting a defensive war, it seems that we're progressing gradually and pushing the enemy back with our attacks.

Being able to push the enemy back to their own borders when we're the ones being invaded, strategically this is a major defeat for the enemy. It's unclear to me what criteria Rindarl has for victory... Well, it has nothing to do with me anyways because I'm only a low-ranked noble with a small domain.

“Oi, the fire arrows have been prepared, my lord.”

As always, Gunther was overly rough and casual in his speech towards me, and I observed the view beneath me from the high plateau. It was a horrible sight of about 100 people impaled on stakes.

The prisoners... well, they’re getting executed. Although it was already decided on that they’d be executed, some of them died already from injuries suffered in battle before being impaled.

“...Honestly, you’ve really come up with something. My lord never did learn the elegance that most nobles are supposed to have.”

“I know full well that it’s something incredibly unpleasant.”

“Ahh. Well, five or six years back, I was trying to kill you instead of the enemy soldiers.”

At his lighthearted reference to how he was honestly trying to kill me back then, I couldn’t resist letting out a wry smile.

“How about now? Do you still want to kill me?”

“Now... well then. Whatever my lord is thinking about or what methods you use, I never think about it anymore.”

Heh, I chuckled a little. Then, while stroking Rashiok who was leisurely relaxing by my side, I looked over the horizon of the plateau.

Northern Arxia was a barren land the same as the composition of the Bandishia Plateau, covered with reddish gravel, and at a glance one could tell that it was an inhospitable place. According to what the Shiru tribe has told me, if you go farther north and travel through the Amon Nor mountains, you can finally begin to find a few plants. Just those limited plants managed to support their nomadic lifestyle before.

“...Marquis Rolentsor, the general commander of the Arxian Royal Army is a fair man. Even to his enemies.”

“What’s this about?”

I changed the topic so suddenly, that Gunther had trouble following me. As we chatted, Agil and Oscar arrived as well, but they just silently listened to me talk.

"That is to say, he treats the enemies with the same honor and dignity as he does friends. Any prisoners that he captures, he will have their wounds treated, give them plenty of food and rest, and ensure that they have a clean bed in a warm dungeon."

"They adhere quite strictly to the code of chivalry, the king's personal army."

"Is it really fine for prisoners of war to be treated so well? We still have to gather our own food these days, or else we face starvation."

Agil spat in discontent, and I nodded in agreement.

"Now that we're on the front lines, we no longer have to gather our own food. Rather, food will be supplied to us. Food is being gathered from the inland domains that won't face combat and transported to the front lines, and Margrave Genas is receiving a huge portion of it."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"The problem is just like Agil said, the prisoners are being treated too kindly. Shouldn't there be times to use the carrot and times to use the stick? Just what are they doing, showing respect and kindness to the enemies that invaded our land?"

In the past, Arxia's wars were always like a whip. Arxia's military might was so overwhelming, that enemies would always be crushed instantly, and Arxia was the strongest country on the continent.

But, the war this time is different. The Rindarl Union definitely has equal military power to Arxia. It's time for the whip to be updated.

The scout began waving his signal flag to indicate that he saw enemy troops. Well, this means the Rindarl soldiers are coming. I picked up my halberd, and stood up.

"...Well then, how about, we become the new whip? Shall we try becoming a symbol of fear and hatred in Rindarl?"

When Oscar made that suggestion, Agil and Gunther both looked at him.

“That’s a good idea. I talked with the folks from Fort Jugfena before, the royal army should act as the carrot, while the others can act as the stick. The difference between two extremes will confuse the enemy, and surely make their morale vulnerable to target. This is all in order to end the war as quickly as possible.”

“Oi, wait a moment. Just what specifically should we do?”

Gunther grabbed my shoulder. I looked straight into his eyes that were so close to mine, and answered him bluntly.

“We will become to Rindarl, what Orville Kaldia was to you.”

I braced myself for him to hit me, expecting it for sure – but it never came.

When I gingerly looked up at him again, Gunther was snorting from his nose.

“You took me too seriously when I said I never bothered with what you were thinking anymore, I think! You’ve become incredibly evil, haven’t you, shitty brat!”

Just as I relaxed and let go of my breath, flick, I received a rather painful flick to the forehead. Surprised, I reflexively rubbed my forehead with my palm.

Gunther muttered some things like “as always, your evil brain is surprisingly excellent, always thinking about things I don’t understand well,” as he trudged back to his own infantry unit.

CHAPTER 148

THE BATTLE OF RITOX PLATEAU, PART 2

Ritox Plateau is located in the lower mountainous region of the Amon Nor Mountains, it's a strategic location that connects the Amon Nor mountains to the Bandishia Plateau, a place that can't be avoided if you want to cross over.

Just in case that the Rindarl army didn't have enough information on our movements, I intentionally let the enemy scouts know we were here. It'll be a great help if they move just as I expect, and see what I've prepared for them.

Thanks to Rashiok's nose and Claudia's eyes, we were able to detect the enemy scouts earlier, but we didn't do anything to them on purpose. After all, we wanted them to tell their army what they saw here and bring their forces.

“Claudia, how is it?”

“Mm, there's quite a lot of dust rising. The Rindarl army is coming! It's going to be a battle!”

Of course, the only one who had sharp enough eyesight to see the dust clouds in the distance, was Claudia. Go back to the shonen manga world you belong in, I brushed away that thought that reflexively came up in me again, and I avoided looking at Claudia who was clearly getting excited.



The Rindarl soldiers passing by under the plateau after a long march to get here were all staring in shock at a ditch in which there was a forest of impaled people. This would be the perfect opportunity to ambush them from above with arrows while they're in a daze, but in order to further increase the effect of their fear and hatred in the future, I waited on purpose.

I could see how shaken and confused the enemy soldiers were. Although their commanders seemed to be trying to restore order, maybe there were some captives in the ditch that the soldiers recognized, there was a surge of soldiers rushing for the

ditch in a huge commotion.

Eventually the effort of their commander went to naught, as the soldiers who were probably conscripted farmers judging from their equipment broke formation entirely and starting rushing for the ditch haphazardly in a mess.

One of their knights riding on a horse with an expression like he'd given up on this rabble, was one of the first to approach the ditch.

"Arxians!! This is too cruel! It's overboard! Do you even have chivalry, or humanity anymore!!"

I stood up and faced towards the knight. Then, from the high elevation of the plateau, I threw what was in my hand in his direction.

At first, the knight was surprised that the one who stood up was a child, but when he saw what was rolling at his feet, his complexion instantly paled.

It was the head of a young soldier. It was easy to tell from his facial characteristics and skin color that he must have been from Densel, and the head's expression was one of dreadful fear and pain with eyes wide open in his final moments.

"What a joke, talking about humanity when you're trying to sneak into someone's home like a rat!"

While the knight was lost for words, I spat out some more choice words for him.

"To begin with, you rejected our terms for surrender, and you were the ones who abandoned these prisoners to their fate. This is the foolish result that you bastards have brought upon yourselves, carve it into your barbaric heads!!"

...This is no good, I'm not skilled at taunting the enemy. The fact that the captives were abandoned by their own country to their fate, even I feel that it's rather pitiful. Since I've already decided that I should leave a terrifying impression in the enemies' hearts, I really need to add more contempt to my voice so they won't take me lightly. It seems that I don't have the talent to become an actress.

I wonder what that knight is thinking about chivalry on the battlefield now. He just kept staring at me dumbfounded, as if his entire code of morals had been shattered,

and this time I started laughing.

It seemed like he didn't even notice the fact that the soldiers behind him were turning into a disorganized, out of control mob.

"What's the matter, rat? You don't feel like fighting anymore? Then, just obediently watch from where you are. From now, let me truly begin executing the Rindarl prisoners."

"What...!?"

I ignored him, and gave Gunther who was standing behind me the signal to begin.

The Rindarl troops that had ignored their commanding knight who was just in a daze, and rushed into the ditch, suddenly heard the command of "fire!" from above.

My soldiers suddenly stood up all at once on the plateau with the fire arrows we had prepared earlier, and all of them aimed their arrows into the ditch. It ignited the oil already smeared on the prisoners in the ditch, as well as the oil that was on the ground of the ditch as well.

Sizzle, there was an instant uprising of a wave of heat. The captives that were still alive while being impaled, and the soldiers that rushed in to save them without thinking, all of them were burned alive as screaming began to echo throughout the plateau.

...This was a reproduction of the worst scene I've ever beheld. Anyways, I judged that this would be the most effective method of planting nightmares into the enemies' minds, so that's why I decided to do this. Well, it's probably even worse than what I remember my father doing, because the scale was much bigger this time.

I could feel cold sweat running down my entire body, and my knees felt like they had no strength in them. As I expected, I felt terrible. I supported myself by leaning against my halberd.

Everyone in the ditch was burning. The soldiers that didn't rush into the ditch all seemed to be watching this spectacle.

The amount of oil I used wasn't all that much. The roaring flames are probably going to lose their momentum soon.

Before the enemy has a chance to calm down and think, I'm going to completely break their minds – it's time to use my other, even more rotten plan.

If the strategy I used in this battle becomes widely known, it's probable that my father's evil reputation will be completely replaced by my own. As expected of Orville Kaldia's daughter, people will make sarcastic jokes about it, mixed with fear and disdain.

“Rashiok, come to me!!”

My most loyal servant, came up to me and rubbed my side.

While it was still chaotic on the ground below, the screams were indeed dying down, and I brought out the tied young captive soldiers – since soldiers are conscripted from the commoners, they have no value as prisoners at all, and Arxia was already planning to execute them anyways.

They were about my age, and in full view of the remaining Rindarl soldiers, I started pushing them down to the fire pit below.

When they fall, since they're tied up and can't stand, they'll end up just rolling around in the flames. Or, maybe they'll fall onto a stake and get impaled.

“-Stop it!! Just how rotten can you be!!”

I could hear a frenzied, angered shouting that was louder than the fire's crackling. I instructed my archers to aim for that voice. It's important to kill the intelligent, rational ones first. I'm going to assert my dominance over this battle from beginning to end.

I shall toy with their emotions, and I've brought their soldiers down to the level of a mob. Then, the defeated soldiers that survive will bring the news of what happened here back to their country, and Egnade suggested I let eight captives go free as well to bring the news – about what I did to their captives in the name of warfare.

Below the plateau, it was a living picture of hell. It was such a strange sight to behold, and with various complicated emotions mixing about inside me, what came out of my mouth was the sound of high-pitched laughter.

【 PART II 】

CHAPTER 149

BETWEEN THE ROYAL CAPITAL AND THE BATTLEFIELD

As the word about what I did to the captives spread, it seems that my adoptive father Ergnade was quite successful in overwhelming and crushing the enemy troops.

After several battles, Arxia was able to capture all the critical strategic locations in the Great Plains and the Bandishia Plateau, and the movements from the Rindarl side stagnated due to the precipitous drop in their soldiers' morale, as well as worsening public sentiment in their country for support for the war.

But, the Rindarl Union wouldn't respond to attempts to negotiate a ceasefire or a truce, and the Arxian Kingdom decided to adopt a strategy of primarily defending its own territory without invading the enemy, so just like that, with winter arriving soon, the two countries were locked in a stalemate.

After the successful routing of the enemies by Ergnade and his older brothers, my name was beginning to get famous as well in both Arxia and Rindarl, and the next thing I knew, I was summoned back to a special military meeting held separately from the House of Lords.

Well, I can probably guess at the reason I was summoned, and so I arrived at the royal palace again right on the cusp of winter. For my achievements in battle, I was rewarded with gold, and an official second-tier medal with my family name engraved on it.

The medal was rose red, engraved with the word Einsbark, made from a gemstone that remarkably resembled the blood-red color of my eyes.

...This medal is one given to commoners or lower-ranked nobles for military achievements. In the medal system of this country, this one should be ranked fourth from the top.

Also, the name engraved on this medal given to me says Einsbark.

When I received land for my domain before, it was quite bothersome, but I wonder if Egnade had something to do with it, like pushing his credit in battle on to me, he seemed suspiciously overjoyed compared to me.

I don't need to receive a second honorary reward like this, my head felt heavy. It's not useful at all in preventing my citizens from going hungry, and the only thing it will do is increase the jealousy that other nobles have toward me.



After returning to my mansion, one day in winter, I called Ratoka to my office. He now works as Claudia's assistant, as well as helping Bellway and Mrs. Marshan run errands.

As always, there was still a strange type of distance between us, apart from occasionally acting as my double, I usually don't call for him much.

According to Ratoka himself, he's usually busy... and since Claudia often chats with him, she says that he's grown up to look much more like a beautiful girl than I do, so I try not to have him near me. Maybe it's because he lacked nutrition when he was younger, but even though I'm one year younger, I'm actually much taller than he is, which apparently also hurts his self-esteem.

“You called for me?”

“Yes, I called for you... Elise. Before we talk, could you straighten your hair, it's a mess.”

“Ah, it's because I was just training together with Claudia earlier.”

After he finished fixing his hair, Ratoka once again asked, “what is it?”

Apart from being my body double on occasion, sometimes when I bring him out of the mansion with me, he's either a maid-servant, or a steward, it depends on what the circumstances require. Therefore, we've prepared several wigs that can greatly change the impression he gives off, and his long hair was trimmed to shoulder length because it was in the way.

“You know how noble children are required to go to noble school in the royal capital in spring when they turn thirteen?”

"Of course. What about it?"

"The rules there allow for servants to be brought. Well, I should say that it's a custom for all nobles to do so."

Ratoka seems to have understood what I meant, he was looking at me with a complex expression. It's good that he's so observant.

"Please prepare for when spring comes and I have to go to the royal capital. While I'll be at noble school for three years, I'll still probably return to Kaldia quite often, so we don't need to bring much luggage. As for clothes, please prepare servant clothing, military clothes, and the Kaldia knight order's clothes."

"...Understood. Um, who else will be coming with us?"

"Athrun from the Kaldia army, and the children named Tira and Reka from Pioneer village. I don't think I'll take anyone else. It'll be quite inconvenient to take more with me."

As always, Kaldia lacks human resources. I don't know if it's because I've become famous lately, immigrants have been slowly trickling in from other domains, I still haven't decided how I want to help them settle in. There's a law however that states you must live in a domain for one year to acquire rights as a citizen of that domain, so I won't be able to consider recruiting from the immigrants until next year at the earliest.

...I believe that my domain has already returned to a similar living standard compared to the other agricultural domains, and even with my lack of personnel, I'm still promoting the development of my domain.

The average lifespan for commoners in this country is in the mid-forties, while nobles typically live to mid-fifties or mid-sixties.

Because the generations change so quickly, I can't afford to make any plans that are too long-term. I have to do what I can, while I can, so I always have a chronic personnel shortage.

CHAPTER 150

TO NOBLE SCHOOL

Noble school. This place is required by law for noble teenagers to attend from thirteen years to fifteen years of age. It's the only general education institute in the country, and it primarily focuses on teaching the contents of the Sacred Code and national law, as well as economics, history, geography, ethics, social studies, and the neighboring countries' languages, it teaches all basic academic classes, and you can even major in some of these classes and pursue research here.

Although it's an educational facility, it's already normal for noble children to receive an education in their own household to some extent, it seems that this school was established by the church in order to give nobles a thorough education in the Sacred Code and on their own country's history and development.

That's why, all noble children are required to live for three years in the dormitories here, and make connections with nobles the same age as them that will be their peers when they come to power.

Other than winter vacation, permission is required from the head of the household in order to leave the school premises, and nobles that aren't researchers, teachers, or students are also prohibited from entering the school grounds.

Because of all this, the noble school that takes up a vast amount of land in the southwest portion of the royal capital, is almost on the scale of a small city, and it has its own unique society nicknamed "the second royal capital."



On the day of the new student orientation ceremony, I headed for noble school together with Ratoka, Athrun, Reka, Tira, and a woman named Cornelia Heideman.

Mrs. Cornelia Heideman is someone who works for the Terejia family in the royal capital as a housekeeper, and she's acting as my guardian in lieu of Earl Terejia, bringing me to noble school. Maybe it's that Earl Terejia, or perhaps, the Terejia family, they want to observe me and see how things go.

We're going to the school with so few servants and very little luggage because I already sold off my tiny residence in the royal capital, and had my things brought over to the dormitory already. I had my servants in my former royal capital's residence head over to the dormitory, and dispose of any unnecessary household items.

“Eliza-sama, what kind of place is noble school?”

In our rented carriage headed for noble school, Reka was excited at first to see the noble school at first, but maybe he got tired of seeing the endless school fence, he asked me a question.

While his command of the Arxian language is still poor, in just a few years he's learned quite a lot and is quite chatty now. It's different from a few years back, when he was a lot quieter.

However, it seems that someone sent by a major family in the royal capital has a different opinion about his question.

“Don't speak to your master with such a carefree attitude.”

Before I could answer him, the cold Mrs. Heideman began scolding Reka strictly. It was so sudden that Reka, Tira, and Athrun all looked at her with surprised faces. Even Ratoka who's had experience in various public events as a maid servant, had an expression of discontent on his face. I was confused for a few seconds as well on how to deal with this, before I said something.

“...Mrs. Heideman, I don't really have any limitations on what they can ask me in private.”

“Then, please take care to change that. Servants being so casual with their master will be terrible for your reputation. People should be aware of their own statuses and behave appropriately.”

I know that already. There are some major differences in how nobles from the royal capital treat their servants in comparison with nobles with their own domains. Those in the royal capital like to keep contact with the servants to a minimum, and servants must not look directly into the eyes of nobles, this is all to maintain their so-called dignity as nobles.

Indeed, for Earl Terejia as well, whenever he was in the royal capital he only had other young nobles following him around and doing his errands. For a family of such high status like the Terejias, they seem to have followers from the lower ranked nobles like viscount and baron families.

Since nobles themselves aren't allowed in the school, usually a lot of servants come from lower ranked noble families, most commonly distant relatives to noble families without enough claim to nobility themselves... noble children from families ranked earl or higher will surely have servants and followers like that.

Although I don't really feel like doing it, now that I've become a lesser earl, technically I'm supposed to accept the daughter of another noble family as an apprentice maid, something like that. But since I was only a Viscountess half a year ago, I have no connections for this. Besides, I decided it would be easier for me to take along people that know me better, so that's why I brought along Tira and the others.

At the very least, I need to have some servants that are trustworthy enough to know about and help me with the secret of Ratoka being my body double, so my childhood friends from the new citizens are necessary to me. Tira, Reka, and Athrun shall become my maid, servant, and bodyguard.

"Then allow me to teach you, before being my servants, they're first and foremost my retainers. ...Ahh, I'm taking them as my servants because they have a deep connection to Kaldia."

I bluntly told Mrs. Heideman that I trusted in their abilities. I took the trouble of bringing servants I wouldn't have to be on guard against, it'll be annoying if I'm forced to hire some servants I don't know just to fit in with other nobles.

It seems that Mrs. Heideman who works in the royal capital for the Terejia family doesn't have a good grasp on the retainer system that's usually used by domain lords. All she did was close her mouth after stubbornly saying "well, don't say I didn't tell you so," and it was easy to tell from her attitude that she was dissatisfied.

"Earl-sama, we've arrived at the main entrance to the noble school."

Just as the atmosphere was getting heavy in the carriage, the driver informed us of our arrival. The carriage that had already been decelerating, stopped completely. Mrs. Heideman got off the carriage without a single word, but her face was twisted

somewhat unpleasantly.

“Mrs. Heideman, please help me take care of the payment for the rented carriage. Since it's my first time, it'll be reassuring to have an adult along.”

Ratoka's intervention finally relieved the atmosphere. ...Perhaps I should reward him with his favorite fruit later. Because he saved me the trouble of having to deal with this troublesome person on my first day of school. No wait, am I being too nice?



When I got out of the carriage, the school gate in front of me overwhelmed my field of vision. On a path paved with bricks, was a beautifully decorated arch which served as the gate. Behind it, I could see a white school building. Also, above it was a perfect blue sky, beautiful weather for orientation day.

It's quite a splendid sight. It's not as glittery as the royal palace, it can be said that the noble school has a majestic and refreshing appearance befitting that of an educational institute filled with rich history and tradition.

...However, this wonderful view was slightly ruined by the memory of a certain otome game's cheaply drawn title and logo also set against the backdrop of this scene.

Come to think of it, just what have I been doing, I shook my head, slightly disappointed in myself. I wasn't even all that busy recently... I almost completely forgot about it because it had no relation to the battlefield. I only remembered it again now that I'm here.

Although honestly, I wouldn't care if I had forgotten, there's only unpleasant memories, that might not even be useful for me.

-This school was the main setting of that otome game.

So, how much will the situations have changed? When I remembered back to poisoning my family, I smiled bitterly. At that time, I was more aware of what would befall me in the game, and I felt a stronger sense of hatred and fear.

But anyways, how about now? Looking at this familiar sight even though I've never been here before, I gradually tried recalling what memories I could.

Although I can still conveniently remember some things about my previous life, I never really cared too much about the details of the otome game, and didn't think it had much value for me.

...Well, it'll probably come back to me if I see someone familiar, so I don't need to try too hard right now. And besides, people are alive in this world, they won't act according to the game's script. It's totally meaningless, trying to guess how someone would act based on something as two-dimensional as a game, although knowing what will happen in the future in some fixed game scenarios, could definitely be useful.

CHAPTER 151

USELESS THINGS

“Oi, look... that’s Earl Kaldia. Black hair and blood-red eyes, there’s no mistake.”

“Ahh, is that the atrociously brutal earl that enjoys blood...”

In the hall filled with chatting students, I could hear some voices talking about me. Since I’m an earl and the second highest-ranking student in school after the crown prince, I’m attracting a lot of annoying attention.

There are far more court nobles that live in the royal capital compared to landed nobles. Apparently in the “second royal capital” of the school, rumors about my infamy have spread quickly from parents to children.

While observing the power balance that was subtly different from the House of Lords, I slowly walked around the hall, looking for anyone that seemed familiar.

There’s supposed to be an evening party for welcoming the new students later tonight, and I thought about if I should attend, but being a recently promoted noble, I don’t want to attract unnecessary attention. And besides, I can feel everyone looking at me, saying whatever they like, and honestly, it doesn’t feel good.

Although I was planning to leave after I found someone I recognized from the otome game, I wasn’t able to find anyone like that. ...At any rate, I don’t really have anything to say to such a person regardless, apart from basic greetings, so how about I take my leave now? Just as I was getting tired of all the attention in the hall, someone tapped me on my shoulder.

“Hey, Earl Kaldia... no, Einsbark. Congratulations on your noble title promotion.”

When I turned around, I saw an astoundingly handsome boy with blonde hair and blue eyes. I managed to suppress my surprise.

“Crown prince Royal Highness...”

This person who was smiling softly at me was the crown prince of this country, Prince Alfred. With a dazzlingly brilliant smile, he held out his hand to me.

I took his hand, and after a moment of confusion, I kissed the back of his hand. He greeted me when we haven't even been formally introduced to each other yet, there's no proper etiquette on what to do in this situation, but from his expression, maybe he had wanted me to shake his hand instead.

I've seen him a few times before when visiting the royal palace, but this is the first time I've seen him up close and gotten a good look at his face. And now, I've remembered that he's one of the capture targets from the otome game, and that he's supposed to be the freshman representative who will give the opening speech later. Now that I'm seeing him directly, some hazy memories are coming back to me about the otome game, just like when I reached the school's door.

I recalled that the crown prince had a close relationship with the other capture targets, and when I looked at the people next to him, as I expected I was assailed with more familiar faces.

It's such a strange feeling. I've forgotten their names, but I remember some other basic information about them from the character list.

According to my vague memories, these guys next to him are the sons of the archduke, and the grandson of the Arxian Royal Army's general commander Marquis Rolentsor, they're definitely people that will be in positions critical to the future of this country.

They're definitely going to be pillars of support for the crown prince in the future. ...I wouldn't be surprised if this school gets attacked by those with nefarious plans in the future. It feels like too many important people have gathered here as freshmen with me this year.

I remembered the woman that invaded our kingdom, and set so much of the commoners' district on fire, but I kept those unpleasant memories to myself.

Well, it's probably due to my high ranking that the crown prince took the trouble of coming to greet me, due to social status within this school. Of course, there are noble children here from higher-ranked noble families than I am, but according to the laws of this country they're still treated as nobles without titles. Most students haven't obtained their own noble titles yet, after all. I think there may be a few students here

that have inherited a baron or viscount title, but I seem to be the only one with a title of earl.

“...I’m so happy to be noticed by Your Highness like this. It’s a great honor to be congratulated like this by you.”

“Mm, I’m happy to hear that we’ll be in the same class. I’ll be in your care from now on.”

I finally managed to eke out some polite words required of me by etiquette, and the prince smiled back beautifully.

Ahh, this is... With such an excellent appearance, I believe I can understand why many people would be attracted to him.

His excellent appearance is one of his qualities. The first prince Albert is known for his intelligence, but evaluations about his appearance say that he’s only average. The second and crown prince Alfred who’s in front of me now, however, has a matchless appearance that makes me doubt my eyes with just how fine he looks.

The fact that he was in the same class as me, I expected that as well based on the game of course, and unlike the first prince – his bloodline has no controversy, coming only from Arxian royal blood.

“Hey, if possible, I’d like it if you weren’t so stiff around me. You’re not my vassal yet, you’re still my father the king’s vassal, and besides this place is just a school. I’d like to just be friends with you, how about it?”

While I was busy thinking in silence and lost in this social situation I didn’t understand at all after too much time on the battlefield, the crown prince’s voice brought me back to my senses again. Maybe that’s why he seemed dissatisfied with my kissing the back of his hand, I must have been too formal.

...If possible, I’d like to agree. If I’m able to say that out loud, how joyous it would be. He’s not just an otome game character, after all. However, I absolutely can’t allow myself to make friends with someone for such a silly reason.

“I apologize if I’m being too formal. Your Highness will be the future king. I can’t allow myself to be impolite, please forgive me.”

“But, are you going to be so formal for three whole years? I think that it’ll just be tiring for everyone. Given our ranks, I think that we’ll be seeing each other quite often.”

...No, of course it won’t be too tiring. What is he talking about, this crown prince.

Although I’m the second highest ranking noble in school after the crown prince, once I leave school, I’ll be just an earl again. What’s more, I’m an upstart inheritor. Unlike a higher rank like a marquis or a margrave, my social status isn’t appropriate for getting close to the crown prince.

There should be some dukes’ daughters here as well, so I think he’d be better off going to find them instead. In noble society, people of different statuses hanging out together would only plant the seeds of useless friction. Even now, I’m still dealing with the annoying consequence of receiving that medal.

Although I say this, my social status is much lower than the crown prince’s, so unfortunately, I’m unable to refuse his direct request.

“...As Your Highness wishes.”

In the end when I was forced to agree with him, the crown prince showed off his gorgeous smile again. It’s quite blinding, my eyes are getting dizzy, please stop it.

“Thank you, earl. By the way, I was curious. Could you please tell me why it is that you’re wearing clothing for boys?”

“According to the school regulations, students with noble titles are supposed to wear formal military attire.”

“Well, I know that, but still...”

I suppose it’s only natural for the crown prince to be confused with what I’m wearing. As always, I wore ceremonial clothing for males.

This noble school has no school uniforms, and most noble children just wear their own clothing that they like. Especially the girls, it’s normal for most of them to dress up every day and accessorize because other nobles’ eyes will be on them. The majority of girls that aren’t engaged will desperately be trying to find a partner here at noble school.

But just as how the crown prince was wearing the clothes of his knight order, I was also currently wearing the military uniform of the Kaldia army, because of the rule where nobles with titles must attend school wearing military clothes. This rule is meant to make their statuses stand out from the other students.

“...Is that rule really necessary for female students to follow?”

“I am the first example of a female student with a noble title that this school has ever had, so it applies to me as well.”

Also, the reason why I’ve always been wearing this style, is still the same as before. Since there have never been any underage female domain lords like me before, there’s a lack of official rules regarding formal attire for girls. That’s why I’ve always been wearing knight attire or my military uniform whenever I attend social gatherings such as evening parties, I never change it.

“These clothes are more practical than skirts, and I happen to like wearing this style as well. I’m glad that I don’t have to spend any unnecessary money on accessories. Your Highness has no need to worry about my clothes.”

“...Um, ...I see. It’s fine if you like it, then.”

The crown prince seemed even more confused as he nodded.

CHAPTER 152

BALANCE BETWEEN CRACKS AND ADHESIVES

“Oh hey, since we’re here, how about I introduce you to my friends?”

“Alright, it’ll be my honor to meet them.”

“Everyone, allow me to introduce her to you. This is Lesser Earl Eliza Kaldia Einsbark. Eliza-dono, these are Archduke Dovadain’s sons, Viscount Grays and Baron Eric. And this is Baron Sieghart from the Rolentsor family.”

“As he just said, my name is Eliza Kaldia Einsbark.”

The lineup of handsome boys in front of me is quite an impressive sight. As expected of otome game capture targets. I suppose it’s typical since all of them are from powerful noble families with long histories. I vaguely feel like their faces are younger than I remember, but it’s probably because I’m meeting them a bit earlier than when the game started.

“Mmm, so you’re the one we’ve been hearing about. When I heard about your military accomplishments, I was very surprised to find out you were a girl.”

“I know. Rather than knight attire, wouldn’t a dress look better on you?”

Everyone around us seemed to be astonished at our gathering, and listening in while chatting about us.

The boys introduced to me named Grays and Eric were chuckling impolitely while saying some inconsiderate things without even formally introducing themselves. The sons of Archduke Dovadain also have royal blood in them, they’re the crown prince’s cousins. Both of them have completely inherited their father Archduke Dovadain’s looks, and the two of them appear so similar that they could almost be twins despite me knowing the fact that they have different mothers. They had red shoulder-length hair tied behind them, with matching light gold eyes. In the game, they had looked like this as well.

In the game I could have sworn that both of them were supposed to be high spec, but am I remembering things incorrectly? In a public place, right after the crown prince's introduction, they're directly being so disrespectful to me. I feel like their heads are rather empty.

"You seem to resemble your father's appearance greatly. It's almost like you're a living incarnation. ...And as for the battlefield, you were quite lucky. I have confidence that our military is quite well-trained, and we would have won anyways. You managed to defeat a small unit that happened to have a high-ranked commander in it, this can't be anything but sheer luck."

Although I didn't allow my facial expressions to move even one centimeter, I wasn't able to dodge their malevolent verbal barbs.

"She's like her father, eh. I've heard about him, the infamous demon domain lord that raped and pillaged his own citizens, and devastated his own domain, right?"

Maybe Eric has a sense for how to strike at weak points, he irritatingly added some more malicious information. I furtively glanced at my surroundings. The people around us listening in, seemed to be drowning me in an unpleasant, sinister atmosphere. The crown prince, and the other member of his retinue Sieghart who hadn't spoken yet, were the only ones who seemed like they were thinking about how to stop Eric.

"-Yes, there's no mistaking the infamy of the previous domain lord. The terrible deeds my father did to his own domain were really troublesome. Even now, the reconstruction still isn't complete. I wish that he was able to have been stopped five years earlier."

"What a ridiculous thing to say. If your father had died five years earlier, you wouldn't have been born."

"If I was born earlier, then there wouldn't have been any problems."

I sparred with him calmly. I predicted that my answers would incite him. Eric was shaking his head in irritation. It seems like my answers are getting under his skin.

-I suppose that we're now going to be more distant from each other.

I know that Eric isn't a direct descendant like Grays and Sieghart, and that his bad temper is most likely the result of his mother being a mistress. Even after graduation, the higher ranked noble children will still associate with each other, and maybe he'll get left out, I think he's just taking things out on me, how troublesome. Since Eric is an illegitimate child, he probably doesn't have a job lined up for the future.

"Eric."

Eric was glaring at me and seemed like he was about to explode, when Grays stopped him by tightly clamping his hand onto Eric's shoulder. He whispered something to Eric, and dragged him away.

Well, although I'm supposed to have a higher rank, there was no respect for me at all. I don't particularly want to worsen my relationship with Grays as well, but I'm probably going to have to deal with high-ranked nobles like the archduke's family in the Upper House of Lords in the future. There's nothing I can do about it, so I'll just leave them alone.

"...My friend was rude to you."

Sieghart awkwardly lowered his head towards me. Being the grandson of general commander Marquis Rolentsor, he had black hair and a sharp glint in his reddish-brown eyes. He has an intrepid face much like his grandfather, and he seems to have ambition as expected for a descendant of the greatest military family in Arxia. He's also the tallest of the four boys, and is in the best physical shape, it was easy to tell that he's a military noble.

My name as well as the Einsbark name are both known as military nobles as well, but compared to him I feel like my body is dreadfully tiny. I guess the huge gap between us is because of gender?

"Please don't mind that. I seem to have hurt his feelings as well."

As I shrugged my shoulders, Sieghart seemed to sigh in relief. I can see a resemblance to Claudia in his actions, it definitely feels like they're related.

"How has Marquis Rolentsor's health been? On the battlefield, he took good care of me."

"If you're asking about my grandfather, you must know him well. While we did live in the same house, he hasn't been there since the war began. It seems that he's been quite busy lately."

"Ahh, then he's probably still dealing with the aftermath of the recent battles. There's a lot of injured soldiers, and many captured prisoners as well. Not only that, the enemy has invented a new weapon. Since the war hasn't ended either, he must prepare for the next battle."

The royal army is commanded by the kingdom, while domain armies are personal armies. That's why in war between countries, most of the fighting is done by the Royal Army and royal knights. Since Marquis Rolentsor has such a solemn personality, he's probably taking the lead in doing the work. I thought about how Egnade was quite busy at this time as well.

"...How about injured soldiers in the Kaldia army?"

The crown prince who had been silently listening to us for a while asked a question in a soft voice. Maybe he already knows how many were injured in the Royal Army, he had a serious expression on his face.

There weren't many large-scale battles in the war – most of the battles were between small forces, and what's more, Arxia hasn't been in any major wars for 600 years. The population has increased greatly since that time period, along with the number of children.

"Fortunately, my army was almost unscathed on the battlefield. My army is primarily made up of cavalry troops... it's a bit of a different configuration from the Royal Army which is primarily infantry."

"Ah, that's good to hear. You won your first battle, and your troops were almost unscathed? You must be a very reliable leader."

The crown prince seemed to be happily praising me, but I felt my lips slightly twisting into the shape of a smile.

"Thank you for the compliment."

I see. He doesn't know yet about the details of the first battle I participated in.

CHAPTER 153

SCHOOL LIFE IS A HANDFUL

Alright then. My school life began with a bit of an argument with the archduke's son, but other than that there didn't seem to be anything new or special about it.

It's because there isn't much change to my daily routine no matter where I am.

Oscar and Claudia send messenger soldiers with political paperwork for me to take care of on occasion, I'm confirming reports and giving instructions on the continuing irrigation work in my domain, I check the food production statistics of my domain and calculate the amount of food that we need to import... and for some reason Fort Jugfena is also sending me intelligence reports on Rindarl for me to peruse over.

Something like an intelligence report, is only supposed to be read by the highest military commanders and the commanders of important strategic locations. It can't be viewed otherwise unless the House of Lords approves of it.

...I'm currently exempted from having to participate in battle because of attending school, so why is Wiegraf sending me detailed intelligence and the proposed battle plans for future clashes? Well, perhaps he's just looking out for me since I fought together with him and his brother Ergnade, and all three of us helped to put together the plan for the display at Ritox Plateau. No, it could also be that he wants me to have as much information as possible, just in case I need to return to the frontlines for some reason.

Because of all my work related to my domain and the current war situation, it's difficult for me to concentrate on my studies. As for all my classes every day and how to deal with learning it – it's simple, I have a body double...

"Hey, today as well that bastard Eric pulled on my hair, and stepped on the hem of my cloak. I thought this was supposed to be an upstanding educational facility? Oh, and the teacher gave an overview of the lecture's content. What's going on?"

"I want to hear more."

Ratoka who just returned from classes was asking me in confusion about what was happening, although I only responded succinctly. ...Although, hair pulling, stepping on the hem of a cloak, that Eric sure is immature. Is he a child? Well, he's thirteen... uh, I suppose he is a child.

"You want the details of the lecture? Um, it was a lecture about the Artolan legal system. Then, it was a comparison on differences between the laws of Artolas and Arxia, even though we both use the Sacred Code as the basis, we discussed why there would be differences, we analyzed its influence, and predicted about what would happen if we adopted some of their laws, things like that."

"Comparing laws? What was the textbook used?"

"The title was 'Observations on Differences in other Sects' Laws.' It's a book from the church."

"Ahh, I've read that book before. There's no problem then. You've read it before as well."

Yep, Ratoka nodded, as he told me some more details about the class. I know that it can be daunting for someone else to attend classes and do all the homework for me, but I've given Ratoka an education and training before so he can handle it. If I had to do these things in addition to my normal workload, it would be an unreasonable amount.

Well, it's not like I make Ratoka do it all the time, I still go and attend classes myself when I can, there's just no helping it... Well, that's what I told myself.

But anyways, I glanced over again at his appearance. Even from an early age I felt like his facial features and all the colors matched mine so well, now that we're both maturing his face resembles mine even more, to the point where even Claudia will sometimes get us mixed up. When comparing side by side, Ratoka's face actually seems more feminine, and because he's been by my side for so long, he can accurately imitate my expressions and reactions without any suspicion. That's why I'm having him go to classes for me...

"...What?"

Has he been taking lessons from Claudia's sharp senses, Ratoka noticed me looking

over at him. I told him it was nothing as I took my eyes off him.



It's now one month after I've entered school, and I still haven't discovered the person that I've been searching for. Since we're still having only basic classes though, and we're supposed to be stuck in class for most of the time, there's no helping it that I can't move around. It should have been easy to find the person I'm looking for just based on appearance, but every time I myself go to class I have to deal with the crown prince's appearance being an assault on my senses with how brightly he stands out, so it's quite a bother.

Today when I decided to attend class for once, just like always my eyes were drawn to the sight of his luxurious head of shimmery blonde hair glittering as it reflected the sunlight from the window. His terribly conspicuous appearance draws everyone's attention at all times, whether he wants to or not. Maybe if I see him more often I'll get used to it, and I'll build up a resistance?

I briefly greeted him and sat down in an empty seat. I don't want to have to be invited by the prince to sit with his group by the time more students come and most seats are taken. It would be quite a bother, as I can easily imagine how much of a commotion that will cause with the other noble students if that happens.

All of these classes have already been drilled into my head by Mrs. Marshan, so the only real reason for me to come to class is to have opportunities to get in contact with the crown prince and find out what he wants, this thought kept going around and around in my head.

...I understand why Ergnade and the others would be concerned about me. I'm someone that can help the war effort. Besides, they gave me their family name, even if we're not related by blood, we're as close as real relatives. I can also understand how the Terejia family is keeping an eye on me because I'm the one who was raised up by Earl Terejia.

However, I have no idea what the crown prince's intentions are towards me. After I graduate from noble school, I'm going to return to my own domain. As someone who's going to control the entire kingdom in the future from the royal palace, why does he try to keep getting border noble that's only a lesser earl involved with him?

Although I'll have to tolerate it patiently for three years, dealing with other nobles isn't something that I enjoy. I just want to stay by myself, I don't want to affect my domain... Since I can't go against the crown prince, I'll just deal with the nobles here the best I can with my poor abilities and stay silent as much as possible.

Crack, I put too much force into my hands as I kept thinking. Then, I heard a snapping sound from between my hands.

“.....”

I've done it now. I snapped my pen.

Well, I did know that my pen was getting quite old and reaching the end of its lifespan. But, I still kept using it because it was still usable. It's not like I have a superhuman grasping strength like Claudia does.

But now, the problem is that I don't have a replacement pen. While I was the one who broke it, I didn't think that it was going to break this quickly, and I just stared at the remnants of the pen in my hand.

...What should I do about the class? Should I try writing with just the top half? I still need to share class information with Ratoka, so I'd like to take notes on the teacher's lecture.

“Excuse me, Earl Kaldia.”

Someone quietly called for me from beside me, and I finally took my eyes off my pen. When I saw who it was, I reflexively let out a small gasp of surprise. The boy who was talking to me was the exact person I was looking for all this time.

He looked like an exact younger copy of Margrave Molton – despite that, he seemed to not stand out for some reason – Margrave Molton's son that he doted on so much sat down next to me.

“Please, go ahead and use this.”

Why did I never notice him, with his distinctive silver hair. While I was frozen in surprise as if I was seeing something I couldn't comprehend, he handed a brand new feather pen to me.

“-Thank you. You've been a great help.”

Although I was thinking about looking for him and greeting him, now that the person I couldn't find was sitting next to me, and I still couldn't get over the shock that he had been in the same class all this time, my mind went blank and I could only respond foolishly to his offering his pen.

...Although, with his hair color, and his face, why didn't his presence draw my attention instantly, like his father or the crown prince?

CHAPTER 154

TWO DIFFERENT GREETINGS

“You’re well acquainted with my father? Wow. Really?”

“Of course. I get along quite well with your father. I even sent you gifts for your birthday celebrations before.”

As we walked together in the brightly lit hallway towards the school dining hall, I had a conversation with the person I finally found after all this time, Margrave Molton’s son, Zephyr Molton.

He has beautiful silver hair, and his eyes are a deeper emerald green compared to his father’s – I’m still confused about how I could have missed him, seeing him up close now. Maybe the crown prince just stood out way too much, causing me to miss him.

“...Ah, do you mean those baked confectioneries?”

“Yep. You have a good memory.”

“Every year, when they arrive, father will be so pleased, acting like it’s from one of his best friends. I always thought that it was from a noble in the royal capital though...”

“My domain doesn’t produce any local specialties. That’s why I buy sweets in the royal capital and send them over.”

“Ah, got it,” Zephyr smiled softly in response. Comparing his expressions with his father, they’re not alike at all. His gentle smile makes him seem like someone you can easily approach. It seems that while they look alike, many personality traits are different.

As we got closer to the large dining hall, the number of students in the hallway increased. Zephyr didn’t seem to mind, but for him to be seen associating with me and my bad reputation, I could sense everyone’s curious and distasteful stares.

“...Ahh, come to think of it, I’m sorry, but I have to do something in the library before

lunch. See you later!"

As we turned around a corner, I took this chance to come up with an excuse to leave. If we're seen entering the dining hall together, it'll attract too much attention.

The Molton family isn't one that has a particularly strong influence or reputation in the royal capital. The Molton domain is geographically located too far away from the royal capital, and Margrave Molton only spends a limited amount of time here.

However, the Molton domain is one of the biggest producers of jewelry thanks to extensive gem mines, so they often earn money by trading in the royal capital. I'm sure that they would like to avoid causing any trouble in the royal capital if at all possible.

Even if the merchants here already know what type of person Margrave Molton is, the school is an isolated environment and it's difficult for me to calculate how much of a negative influence associating with me will be for Zephyr.

"Is that so? Ah, er... mm. Then, see you later, Earl Kaldia... er, Einsbark."

Zephyr tilted his head slightly as he said goodbye, which I'm sure the other students noticed. I accepted this, and waved goodbye to him.

"You can just call me Kaldia, Molton. Otherwise it's a bit easy to get confused with the other Earl Einsbark."

"Ahh, that's right. Hm... you can just call me Zephyr as well. Molton sounds too much like my father."

"Let's do that then."

He nodded as he left. It seems that his father and him are both similarly chatty. Even though he's just as welcoming as his father, it gives me a strange feeling. So are their atmospheres similar after all, or am I just feeling nostalgia because of their similar welcoming chattiness?

"-Oi."

I heard a voice from behind me, and I reflexively turned around while holding my coat so that it wouldn't get in my way. While turning around I also jumped back two steps,

and I smacked away the hand that was reaching for my hair.

I heard a small moan of pain from the hand's owner. Because I couldn't see him coming, he probably thought that this was a good chance to attack me.

"...Excuse me, Baron Dovadain. My apologies if I scared you – it's a habit from the battlefield."

I barely managed to refrain from pulling out my sword, and I informed Eric about my habit in a steely voice. Honestly, if I hadn't controlled my reaction a little, I probably could have sliced him in half. Gunther drilled my reflexes against ambushes deep into my bones.

At any rate, I'm someone who was on the battlefield. Eric should at least take that into consideration. I can't just kill the members of the archduke's family however I like, though.

"And, did you need something from me?"

"...Where are you going. Isn't it lunchtime right now? Just what are you planning to do, going in the opposite direction of the dining hall, away from where everyone is? Are you planning to slice someone's servant into little pieces?"

I tilted my head at his voice filled with enmity and sarcasm. Just what does he mean, saying I plan to slice someone's servant into little pieces? It's such an unexpected comment, that I can't tell if it's a dark joke meant as some sort of greeting or if he seriously thought that was what I was planning.

"I'm headed for the library. I thought that I'd see if they had any books on irrigation."

"...Irrigation? What is that?"

"There's lots of undeveloped land in my domain. Preventing floods, and creating a water transport system near rivers and lakes so that people can live there is what irrigation is."

"Oh. Aren't you the hard worker."

Even though I answered his question, Eric was still quite brusque and seemed

frustrated. It's bothersome to deal with him, so I decided to leave, when he stopped me again.

“I’m not done talking with you yet!”

“...What else is there?”

“Alfred seems to have a high opinion of you, but Grays and I don’t trust you yet! Know your place and don’t get too close to Alfred, you upstart lesser earl!”

Know your place, doesn’t this kind of not apply to me? I know better than anyone the distrust and loathing that many nobles have towards me. I’m the one who’s confused on why Crown Prince Alfred is taking an interest in me.

“As for whatever deep thoughts His Royal Highness may be thinking, I wouldn’t know, as I’m merely a lesser earl. However, since His Royal Highness can think for himself, and as he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, I’m sure he’ll soon learn more about social statuses just by spending time at this school.”

“Huh? What does that mean?”

While Eric was still tilting his head in confusion, I merely said “sorry, excuse me now since I really need to go to the library,” left him there just like that.

What does it mean? It means that I know full well the difference in status between the crown prince and myself. Sigh... in order to put some more distance between the crown prince and myself, should I find an excuse to go back to Kaldia some time? I’m the head of the household anyways, so I can give myself permission any time I feel like it.

CHAPTER 155

MOCK DUEL

(TL note: After checking it out, it seems that Jeff Molton's first name was originally indeed intended to be Zephyr. Therefore, I've changed his name, even though he doesn't appear in this chapter.)

I held the tip of my rapier horizontally, pointed at the throat of the general commander's grandson Sieghart. Although normally wider swords should be used in battle, as rapier techniques are mostly ceremonial.

My opponent Sieghart set up an elegant pose with his in front of his body, as someone who will surely enter the Royal Guards knight order in the future, he was probably educated in the finest ceremonial rapier techniques there are.

“I'll begin.”

“Please go ahead.”

Since rapiers are light short swords, it's a high-speed duel. Even though Sieghart said that he'll begin attacking, he took his time in testing my defense for openings, without going for direct attacks.

No matter how light it is, you need to have adequate muscle strength in order to maintain the proper sword stances. If we keep dueling defensively, I'll be at a disadvantage due to my limitations in stamina. Taking that into consideration, I began my offensive.

I purposely crossed swords with him, and managed to avoid being hit by his next slash, using the momentum from our swords clashing to jump back. Clang, while our swords weren't broken, there was a grating sound in the air while I almost lost hold of my sword from the impact, having to pull on the edge of my coat to find my balance again, as I put distance between us and fixed my combat stance.

...As expected of the foremost military family in this country. There are no flaws in his defense whatsoever. It's quite evident that he's extremely skilled in handling his

sword.

“Beautiful moves, Rolentsor!”

“It’s all thanks to countless hours of practicing!”

Turning on one foot, I avoided his sword which instantly came at me again, and blocked his attack with my sword. Originally in ceremonial swordplay, once you trade blows you’re supposed to draw back, but – reflexively, I stepped forward into his bosom.

“Wha!?”

Screech, a high-pitched metallic sound was ringing. Even though Sieghart obviously had more muscle strength than me, I was pushing back his rapier with my own. I had the advantage in positioning, and he was forced just slightly off balance.

I increased the speed of my movements even more, and I stomped down diagonally – aiming straight for his feet.

There was a pleasant sound as my foot connected against his, and the general commander’s grandson fell face forward onto the thick mat. Just as I was about to reflexively attack his wide-open back with my sword as he poised both his hands to break his fall, the instructor shouted “that’s enough!” at that moment.

I threw down my sword, then I finally remembered that this was only supposed to be a practice duel, which caused me to really want to clench my head.

-This is bad. I’ve gone completely overboard. Unconsciously, I moved according to the familiar movements of my training, but I shouldn’t have done that here.

“...Eh, huh?”

Sieghart seemed to be terribly confused as he dazedly looked at me. “Are you alright,” I asked him. While he didn’t shake his head, his head was bleeding slightly from what I did to him. Still, I kept asking him if he could stand up, while he just remained sitting there in his daze, and I just repeated my question over and over while hurriedly extending my hand to him, and he finally took my hand and pulled himself up.

“Sorry, I... are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine...”

The general commander’s grandson who was just slightly taller than me kept looking at me with a confused expression. I think he was about to say something, just when he opened his mouth, the instructor called out my name, with an “Earl Kaldia!”

“Ahh, Earl Kaldia. What was that, that underhanded swordsmanship?”

Listening to the instructor’s shocked reaction, I reflected on my actions that this was just as I expected. The training ground for the practice duel suddenly became abuzz with commotion when it was completely silent during our duel.

“Swordsmanship is something that’s supposed to be elegant, beautiful, fair, and clean. It’s inconceivable that you, a noble, would use such a tactic suited for commoner soldiers!”

“...My apologies.”

This time was my fault. Normally I hold back when swinging my sword around. ...The general commander’s grandson was too strong, I wasn’t able to help myself because he was the first one I couldn’t win against unless I used my full abilities.

This mock duel between Sieghart and I, was originally intended by the instructor to be a demonstration of ceremonial swordplay, in order to teach the other students that hadn’t learned it before.

If I win using tactics that aren’t a part of ceremonial swordsmanship, then it won’t be an example for the other students. Because my opponent only used ceremonial swordsmanship, I’m the one who broke a rule here. It’s completely considered my fault.

“-Humph. As expected, cowardly methods befit the cold-blooded earl famous for killing unarmed enemies without even flinching. Doing such an ugly thing, winning with no pride or honor at all. Just like a low-class commoner.”

Eric’s voice instantly came ridiculing me from the side, when right after his rant Sieghart roared at him. “**ERIC!!**” Sieghart is someone who’s talented enough to know

that my combat style is necessary on the battlefield, so he's probably defending me because of it.

"Eric, I can't let this insult pass. Take your words back right now!"

"Oh, um, Rolentsor, wait a moment. It was my bad just now... Please calm down."

He tried convincing Sieghart in a subdued voice. I suppose this situation is bad for him. For someone who will likely be the future general commander by the crown prince's side to be seen shouting angrily at Eric like this in class, it will cause rumors.

"But, your words just now were an insult to every soldier on the battlefield. It's unforgiveable."

"Even so, what he says is true. I used a style that wasn't appropriate for this place, my earlier sword technique was indeed learned from commoners. It doesn't change the fact that I used an underhanded technique during the duel. My apologies."

I whispered that to Seighart so only he could hear it, but it was obvious for anyone that Eric had been ridiculing me. The commotion in class kept increasing in volume, to the point where the noble instructor was shouting "quiet!"

The crown prince and Grays just happened to not be here today due to official business, normally they would be able to help contain the commotion.

...Ahh, this is terrible. For Eric who was trying to "preserve honor in duels" to get shouted at by his friend Sieghart like that, his pride will greatly suffer. And now, nobody's here who can help calm him down.

"...What are you talking about, Sieg! It's because of dirty tactics, that you always lose!"

Sure enough, when Eric's temper flared up and he started shouting angrily back at Sieghart, I involuntarily leaned my head back and stared at the ceiling. I already knew that trying to reason with children was an impossible task, and that it would only lead to loud arguments – this is something I know from experience.

".....What?"

Now I heard Sieghart's low voice filled with anger. I kept scolding myself mentally for

my major blunder in not holding back being the cause of this gigantic mess.

CHAPTER 156

THE REASON FOR CHILDREN ARGUING, MY SECOND EXPERIENCE

“My head hurts... I don’t want to go to school...”

“What are you saying, weren’t you the one who said I shouldn’t switch in for you for a while?”

Ratoka was chewing his breakfast while talking, furrowing his eyebrows in puzzlement. Ever since that mock duel, I hardly ever had him substitute in for me. Based on the situation, I judged that it would be difficult for him to take my place.

“Hey, you should eat your breakfast properly as well. Just what exactly happened? I’ve never seen this type of expression on your face before.”

“...You’re being noisy. I don’t want to talk right now, Elise...”

I kept clenching my head, while Ratoka stopped eating, picked up a piece of bread and smeared some jam on it, and stuffed it into my mouth.

“Hurry up and eat. You’ll be late for the next class unless you leave soon.”

...Urk. My head hurts. I don’t want to go to school. I mean, why do I need to keep going to classes I’ve already learned? Rather than doing something meaningless, shouldn’t I use my time more productively instead on my domain lord work?

Am I the type of student to skip classes though? That thought kept circling around in my head as I listlessly ate my breakfast.

“Good morning, Kaldia. Are you alright? You don’t look so good...”

“Ahh, Zephyr... Good morning.” (*TL reminder: Jeff -> Zephyr, see last chapter TL note*)

Zephyr sat down next to me and looked over with a concerned expression. I decided to go to class in the end, although I feel like I may feel worse if I don’t take a break soon. He often talks to me like this, even though his reputation may be affected. Lately I’ve been worrying as well if he’s suffered because of it, so as a result I’ve been chatting with him more often.

“My body’s fine. I’ve just been dealing with too much lately, I’m a bit tired.”

“I see. Try not to overdo things? Um... it’ll be difficult for everyone if a domain lord collapses.”

“Ahh, thank you for your concern.”

He should also know the real reason why I’m not feeling well. However, I’m very grateful to him that he isn’t asking me to talk about it, it’s very difficult for me right now as it feels like my heart is being stabbed.

“Good morning, Earl Kaldia, Molton.”

“...Good morning, Rolentsor.”

“Good morning as well to you, Baron Rolentsor.”

Sieghart came over to us like it was the natural thing to do for him, his nonchalant expression saying he felt like he belonged, and I softly clutched my head again.

It’s been 10 days since that mock duel. However, after the argument between Sieghart and Eric on that day, they’ve been arguing each time they see each other every day now. Crown Prince Alfred and Grays still haven’t returned yet from their official business, so there’s nobody that can mediate between them.

And on top of all that, the general commander’s grandson now hangs out with me every day as if to guard me from Eric.

This is why my head hurts.

For Sieghart who's a member of the prestigious Rolentsor military family, he can easily make a connection with Eric who has royal blood from Archduke Dovadain who is the king's younger brother, if they just talk it out, I'm sure they can go back to being good friends again and forget about their argument.

The crown prince and the two brothers from the archduke's family have a social status that's far too different from mine, if at all possible I don't want to associate with them, but the general commander's grandson is a different story. I already get along quite well with several members of the Rolentsor family, and taking the future into consideration I think that I wouldn't mind if I had a friendlier relationship with just Sieghart from the four capture targets.

However... this situation is bad. Since I'm in the center of it all, it's really bad.

After that mock duel – Sieghart forced Eric to apologize twice for his insults that went overboard. I also apologized myself, only to Sieghart.

Of course, Eric became more distant from us after this incident. Then, Sieghart declared in front of the entire class, that he wouldn't renew his friendship with Eric until he apologized sincerely.

Even though Sieghart seems quite calm now, the way he's dealing with this whole matter is... he's just a stubborn child, although I can't say that directly to him.

This is terrible. ...Because of me, there's now a rift in the crown prince's retinue. Right now it's still only to the extent of a children's quarrel, but when I think about how the story might be twisted by the time the crown prince returns... my head hurts.

"Come to think of it, I think it's about time... if it's okay with both of you, I'd like to call you by your first names. Especially since I've heard that Earl Kaldia already has a good relationship with several other Rolentsors?"

"...Mm, ahh...?"

"Or would you prefer if I just call you Kaldia like Molton does? In my opinion, I think that we're friendly enough now where I'd like to be granted this permission."

“Ahh... I suppose...?”

During my headache Sieghart kept bothering me about something, but honestly I didn't really pay attention to what he said and just responded with something that seemed appropriate. Then I noticed how happy he suddenly seemed to be, which snapped me back to my senses with a bad feeling.

“Is that so, thank you. Then I'll be in your care, Kaldia. Is it alright if I also call you Molton then?”

“Oh? It'll be my honor, becoming friends with you. Go ahead and call me Molton if you like.”

...Wait a moment. This is a conversation about what to address each other as?

Among nobles, what they call each other in private is a huge indication of their level of friendship. At first you're supposed to address them by their proper name or title, they'll use honorifics when they get to know each other, and when they become close friends they'll start calling each other by name.

Now I'm deeply regretting that I responded without paying attention. I hope that this won't cause the fighting to intensify even further... and, when I noticed Eric glaring in our direction ferociously, my all too sweet dream was dashed instantly.

Before the crown prince returns, I need to figure out how to manage Eric and Sieghart.

...Ahh, my head hurts. I want to go back to my room and sleep.

CHAPTER 157

DEALING WITH ACCUSATIONS DURING A CHILDREN'S MEETING

“We’re going out. Reka, Tira, please make the preparations.”

“...Eh?”

I got a reply from my guardian that I contacted for the first time after I came to noble school. After I confirmed the contents of Earl Terejia’s letter, I placed it in my desk drawer, and Tira who thought she would just prepare my school things like usual raised her voice in surprise.

“Out? Does that mean we’re going outside the school?”

“Yep. First we’re going to Earl Terejia’s residence, then the House of Lords, and after that will depend on the situation. Elise will come as ‘Ratoka’ today. He’ll act as my personal attendant.”

“Understood.”

Saying that he’s going as Ratoka today, means that he’ll be wearing men’s clothing this time. With an expression that said he was tired of having to wear annoying maid clothes all the time, Ratoka quickly left the room to go change together with Reka.

“...Wait a moment. We’re going to the House of Lords as well?”

“Arktoria Castle which contains the House of Lords only permits nobles to enter. You guys can just wait for me at the entrance. There’s no need to be so nervous, Athrun.”

“Nah... It’s not that I’m nervous. Are you going to be alright, taking us with you? Taking us Shiru tribe members close to the royal palace, won’t it be a problem?”

“It won’t be a problem,” I answered the anxious Athrun as I looked him over from head to toe. The Shiru tribe that originally lived in the plateau have slightly darker skin than

people from the Jugfena region, but their facial features are just about the same. Besides, I wondered why Athrun thought it would be a problem.

In my domain, I've successfully kept any negative feelings about the Shiru tribe under control. In fact, my original citizens have positive feelings towards them, as they've helped spread domesticated meat, milk, and dairy products in Kaldia. Even though we're not in Kaldia now, there really shouldn't be anyone holding such negative feelings toward the Shiru tribe here. And when the war with Rindarl begins, many Shiru members joined my army for the war effort, and the current atmosphere in my domain is that discriminating against them is taboo.

Athrun's line of sight moved to Tira standing behind me. Tira is the only pure Shiru kid among us, and it's a bit evident that her skin is somewhat darker than the farmer's child Reka and the half-Shiru Athrun.

"Arxia has many people with darker skin. There's plenty of people from the southwest with even darker skin than the Shiru tribe. Your features may be considered rare in the eastern part that we reside in, but it's common for nobles' servants to come from all over the place, so nobody will find you strange at all."

"I see..."

Athrun nodded, but it still seemed like he wasn't in full agreement. ...Well then. In noble school, there's very few people that know just where Tira and Athrun came from.

Maybe those who are extremely well informed will figure out from their skin color that they came from the Artolan refugees that Kaldia accepted, but like I just explained to Athrun, it's common in Arxia for there to be tan skin even darker than theirs. With no evidence, not counting children, any nobles with an education wouldn't make a fool of themselves without proof.

I turned from Athrun and looked at Tira. She was still smiling calmly and softly, but since Athrun seemed to be so worried, as their guardian I feel like I should say something about this.

"Tira, in the end Mrs. Heideman is just someone from outside Kaldia. No matter what she said that day, don't worry about it. You're always my citizens first and foremost, and I won't let even the Terejia family insult you guys. I don't mind even if I have to

issue a formal protest to Marquis Rittergau. I'm going to meet his younger brother today, anyways."

"Oh, I didn't mind it. Personally, I think that I can trust my lord, Eliza-sama more than anyone else, and believe what you say. ...Um, you know, for us Shiru tribe, the word of an outsider is worth less than the baying of our livestock. That's why, it doesn't really matter what other people say."

I nodded at Tira's words. Servants usually have different ranking systems divided by gender. For Mrs. Heideman who was the head housekeeper, it must have been a blow to her pride when she learned that Tira who's only my maid had a larger room given to her than what Mrs. Heideman probably had.

Since the Terejia family has profited from the demands created by war, for them to send her for the purpose of disparaging the Shiru tribe couldn't have been their intention. If Mrs. Heideman had been using the Shiru tribe as an excuse to attack Tira, it's because she couldn't find any other faults. Tira's such an excellent maid.

"...Shiru women are so strong."

Athrun finally seemed relieved as he muttered that. Ratoka finished changing and came back at this time, and just like that this matter was settled.

I suppose I need to start paying attention to Mrs. Heideman's movements, and judge based on the situation if I need to fire her. For the Terejia family to have saddled me with such a useless person, it's a good chance that they've given me. The Terejia family isn't a solid rock after all, maybe this will become a useful attack card in the future.

CHAPTER 158

THE ARCHDUKE'S FAMILY SITUATION, PART 1

It's really been so long since I last saw Earl Terejia.

"I haven't come to greet you for such a long time, my apologies."

"No, it's fine. I was the one who should have been there for your school's opening ceremony."

The earl was casually resting on a couch, and it feels like his expression is just slightly less strict than usual after seeing me return here. Ever since he arrived in Kaldia to become my guardian, the situation had been so bad in my domain that it took up so much of his time, that's why the earl that I usually see was always so strict.

"I've heard that you've been feeling worse lately..."

"It's just some light coughing. My family is making a big fuss out of nothing every time I want to get some bed rest for a day or two. There's no problem."

"Is that the case? I'm glad to hear it's not serious."

"Humph, everyone's treating me like an old man at death's door. Even though my older brother is still energetically working in the castle every day. Shouldn't he be the one treated like me because he's even more of a workaholic?"

After my tenth birthday, Earl Terejia started staying in the royal capital for longer periods of time. And when I was promoted in noble rank, he ended his regency of taking care of Kaldia for me, and returned to his royal capital residence permanently.

He has no children or anyone who will inherit his title, and lately he hasn't been attending House of Lords meetings much either. Apart from doing some accounting for the royal palace which was his original work and the basis for his noble title, he's mostly retired now, and spends his time enjoying himself in his mansion.

"...Well, it's whatever. Anyhow, I hear that you've been caught up in a troublesome

situation?"

He still holds much information on the other nobles' weaknesses, and even now many nobles in the royal capital will often come to consult him on various matters. As always, my guardian seems to have a little too much influence.

Well... it's exactly because he has so much information that I'm coming to consult him this time, though. Since my noble rank was promoted, I'm going to have more and more dealings with other nobles in the future.

"Yes. Actually, Eric-dono from the archduke's family is giving me some trouble..."

"It's just like the situation you wrote me about in the letter? After I read it, I instantly disposed of the letter."

I simply confirmed by nodding. Before I came to visit him, I gave him a report on the tangled relationships between me, the crown prince, and the three members of the prince's retinue. Since I also wrote my personal thoughts about them in my report, it would greatly trouble me if someone other than the earl saw it, and the earl and I are now deeply connected and on the same boat, so of course he would never betray me and he shredded my letter. That's what he meant when he said he disposed of it.

"Yes. Also, I don't understand why Eric seems to have such strong feelings of enmity toward me for the things I said. Although I did want to verbally attack him so that it would be easier for me to be distant from the crown prince."

"It seems like you haven't talked much to the Rolentsor boy or Grays yet? Especially Grays, you haven't talked to him since the first day other than greeting him?"

"It felt like an appropriate distance to keep from Grays-dono, it felt comfortable this way. Does it have to do with the archduke's family education as well?"

I don't know what type of person Archduke Dovadain is, as he hardly ever attends House of Lords meetings. As the younger brother of the king, he's a major figure in the Upper House of Lords, but from what I can tell, he almost never gets involved in politics.

"...The archduke's family, eh..."

However, it appears that even Earl Terejia who's spent time in the Upper House of Lords before doesn't know much about the archduke. In a rare instance, he didn't have much to say, and his usually strict face became even grimmer.

I kept drinking my black tea as I waited for him to say something. While waiting for the earl's information, I reviewed the facts I already knew about the archduke's family.

No matter how much of a child he may be – even if Eric is only an illegitimate son, he's still from one of the most important major noble families, and his behavior is too strange. Every time he behaves inappropriately, it makes me raise my eyebrows in wonder at just what kind of education he received in the archduke's family, and he's done so more than once.

He's the son of a concubine, with how much he resembles Grays and the way he acts, he probably received equal treatment to Grays. Then, his education shouldn't have been all that different from Grays.

Among the crown prince and his retinue, Grays is the only one who hasn't spoken to me much. Does he already have his sight set on being the next archduke I wonder, it feels like he has an attitude where he doesn't even pay attention to a mere upstart lesser earl.

And, I feel like his attitude is to be expected. Sieghart being from a military family is an exception, but the crown prince and his two cousins that are the archduke's sons shouldn't be showing this much interest in me.

...Since noble school has its own isolated society, it's unavoidable that the crown prince and other nobles would pay attention to me since I have the second highest noble ranking.

However, that only applies inside noble school, once we're back in normal noble society, I'm still just one of many lower-ranked nobles. With regards to military noble families, the Rolentsors and the Einsbarks are much more accomplished than I am. The crown prince is being way too friendly with me for some unknown reason... but I'll leave him alone for now.

The mystery is in the difference between Eric and Grays. Being from the archduke's family, Grays is distancing himself from me appropriately, but Eric isn't doing so. But if they had different educations and were treated differently in their family, Grays and

Eric shouldn't be so close to each other. Even though one is the heir and the other a bastard son, they get along just like twins would. Since Eric is allowed to be equal to Grays, then why is it that their attitudes toward me are so different?

...I really don't want to stick my nose in other families' household problems, but in order to manage Eric, so that nothing bad happens to me in the end, I'm going to have to learn more about whatever his bothersome family issues are.

CHAPTER 159

THE ARCHDUKE'S FAMILY SITUATION, PART 2

“...How much do you know about the archduke’s wife?”

Just as I was finishing the last sip of my black tea, Earl Terejia finally spoke up.

“I’ve heard that Grays’ mother is the official wife, and Eric’s mother is a concubine, and that the archduke got married when he was still one of the possible heirs to the throne.”

“The archduke’s concubine Marleen is from the Provents family... which is a branch family of Marquis Zellutelutsviha’s family, and the archduke’s official wife Otelia is from Duke Zastin’s family. The archduke married them both at almost the same time, and again they almost simultaneously gave him two sons, Grays and Eric, in the same year. I don’t know in detail if his two wives get along well or not. Marleen almost never goes out in public.”

“Zellutelutsviha...”

“Marleen’s a princess of Zellutelutsviha. In order to deepen the relationship between the royal family and the independent Marquis territory, it was a common type of political marriage in order to increase friendship with Zellutelutsviha.”

In the Red Karan mountains, there’s a unique area in Arxia known as the independent Marquis territory. I didn’t know that Eric’s ancestry hailed from such a region. Well, unless Eric’s temper is because of a special type of mental disorder in Zellutelutsviha, I don’t see how this is very useful so far.

“Also, from what I’ve heard, the concubine Marleen was originally treated the same as the official wife Otelia. That’s probably why Eric has a higher status than Otelia’s second son as well.”

Come to think of it, I received an invitation recently to Grays’ birthday party first, meaning he’s older than Eric. I didn’t pay much attention to it, since nobles typically send out a huge amount of invitations just for courtesy.

Considering my current relationship with Eric, I really want to decline it, but...

“Was originally, does that mean it’s not the case anymore?”

“Marleen passed away approximately five years ago.”

I looked at Earl Terejia as he fell silent.

“...I didn’t know about that. The concubine being treated equally to the official wife in the archduke’s family, as well as her having passed away, it’s not well known to many people.”

I would remember any knowledge about the royal family and the archduke’s family as it’s common sense to do so. If there’s something I didn’t know, it probably means that it wasn’t meant for a lower-ranked noble like me to begin with.

“The archduke’s family held only a small private funeral for Marleen, and it seems that they only told the relevant parties.”

“I see, does this all have to do with Eric’s outrageous behavior?”

“I can’t say with absolute certainty, but I did start hearing bad things about Eric’s reputation right after Marleen’s death. He lost his mother, he’s alone in a complex family situation, it’s conceivable that his personality may have become a little twisted in such a scenario.”

...As he said his personality may have become a little twisted, it felt like the earl was taking a very deep look at me. Well, in my case, my personality may have become twisted when I killed my parents, Eric’s case is probably a lot different from mine.

“So the exact reason is unclear, correct?”

“That’s all I know. It’s because I hardly have any dealings with the archduke’s family.”

After that, he stopped talking, and finished his already cold tea.

It seems that if I want any more information than this, I’ll have to find it myself, eh. I do have the birthday party invitation coming up, so that’s a potential chance I could use. I’m going to have to adjust my schedule again... I suppose I should leave

everything I don't have time to handle personally to Ratoka.



In the afternoon, just like I planned, I went to the House of Lords. Since there aren't many people staying here during spring, the meetings usually aren't as important. Usually what they do in spring is things like confirming the national budget, hearing cases involving people from the palace, stuff of this degree.

I took the fact that the House of Lords usually doesn't have anything important going on at this time into consideration when I decided to leave school to go and collect information today. Since the House of Lords is where nobles gather, it's a place where I can gather information even if there's no meeting today as some nobles will still be there.

"Hello, how are you today, Earl Ruktoferd?"

"Ohh, if it isn't Earl Einsbark. How are you? How's school life treating you?"

"It's a fresh experience for me every day. I've never had so many people of the same age around me before."

The first noble that I saw and greeted was Earl Ruktoferd. His domain is one of the few that produces warhorses, and Kaldia's first batch of horses was from the Ruktoferd domain as well. And since a retired soldier from his army was the one who helped teach my cavalry troops how to ride horses, I've known and had dealings with Earl Ruktoferd for a long time.

"What are you up to today, then? I thought that there wasn't anything on the agenda today about the Kaldia domain..."

"Actually, I wanted to consult with you about something today, Earl Ruktoferd. It's about the Shiru horses that my domain took in..."

Although it hasn't reached the extent to where I can export them, the number of horses in Kaldia have been steadily increasing every year. The Shiru horses are smaller than warhorses from Ruktoferd, and aren't as suited for traveling long distances or pulling heavy carriages, but their lightness, ease of handling and top speed are excellent qualities for my light cavalry on the battlefield to become a mobile strike unit, and it

seems that others have become interested in purchasing some from me lately as a result of my success in battle.

Meaning, Kaldia could possibly become Ruktoferd's business competitor in the future. The earl seemed slightly confused that I would consult him, but he politely said "alright, I'll hear you out" as he led me to an empty resting area in the House of Lords.

Honestly though, the Shiru horses are just bait to get the earl hooked in conversation, my true goal is to hear more from him about the eastern border's situation since he regularly supplies the border with horses... After talking about horse breeding, I can steer the conversation in that direction. I talked with the earl about the possibility of breeding Shiru horses with his horses and creating a new breed of warhorse, improving the species slowly over the next fifty years, a grand plan to undertake.

Of course, I was able to achieve my actual goal as well. Thanks to our conversation, I learned that the stalemate on the eastern border was still continuing, and that the royal army's lower-ranked troops were slowly becoming disorderly.

About 10,000 soldiers are basically occupying enemy territory now and remaining there. While Arxia is forbidding them from making any further attacks, they must always be on guard for ambushes from Rindarl, it's a stressful situation for the soldiers.

...It's only a matter of time before our soldiers' morale begins to drop as well. I shall inform Egnade of this situation. He's not a member of the royal army himself however, so I don't know if he'll be able to intervene effectively.

CHAPTER 160

LIKE A BOARD GAME

The next day when I returned to noble school, “good morning,” just as Zephyr greeted me, he was roughly pushed aside, by someone I hadn’t expected to see so soon.

It’s Eric. He was glaring at me as if he had something against me, an expression that seemed like he was dissatisfied with something. ...It feels a bit pitiful that I have to deal with opponents like him that are even shorter than me.

Before I could even ask just what he wanted, I noticed Zephyr falling from the violent shove, about to hit a desk, and I reflexively grabbed on to Zephyr’s arm. I managed to catch him right before his head hit the corner of the desk.

Maybe I pulled Zephyr too hard, this time he staggered forward. I was about to support his shoulder with my left hand, but my arm was still trembling from the impact so he slipped from my hand, so I had to catch him in my arms.

Even though I do exercise regularly, of course I don’t have the strength to hold someone my size for a long period of time, but he was a bit dizzy and had trouble standing by himself. -Since it couldn’t be helped, I gently rolled Zephyr onto the floor.

“...That was dangerous. You almost hit your head.”

“T, thank you, Kaldia. You saved me...?”

Even though he thanked me, I feel like there was a question mark at the end of his sentence, is it because I ended up rolling him onto the floor? I made sure to do it gently so that he wouldn’t get injured, but I don’t quite recognize the expression he’s making right now.

I pulled Zephyr’s arm again to finally help him stand up, then turned around and looked at Eric. He seemed rather shaken, and he stood there frozen. However, the moment he noticed me looking at him, he started moving awkwardly, and he slowly changed his expression to an apologetic one as he looked away from me and at Zephyr.

“...Uh, my bad, Molton. Um... because I wasn’t paying attention, you may have been injured.”

.....What, was that supposed to be an apology? Is Eric a commoner or a low-ranked noble? It doesn’t seem like an apology that should come from the high-class archduke’s family that can have the most luxurious lifestyle, living off of the people’s taxes.

As Zephyr was about to hurriedly say something like “not at all,” I pulled on his arm and stopped him. Zephyr is the eldest son of a margrave. As a member of a higher-ranked noble family, he should consider proper noble behavior at all times. Since Eric obviously isn’t being very polite, there’s no need to be polite to him back, even if he’s from the archduke’s family.

Zephyr seemed surprised as he didn’t say anything, and I coldly stared in Eric’s direction. Eric also wasn’t saying anything. I don’t know why, but his willful expression suddenly seemed to be at a loss for what to say.

“-Kaldia, Molton. Even Eric’s here as well. What just happened?”

With a dubious expression on his face, Sieghart arrived. That’s when Eric’s atmosphere of confusion suddenly vaporized.

Eric turned around, and left the classroom just like that. He can’t deal with his emotions, so he ran away, is that what it was? He’s at a moody age, maybe something like that.

And in the end, I didn’t even find out what Eric wanted from me...

“Um, there’s something I’ve always been thinking that I haven’t said before. Could it be that Eric just wants attention from Eliza-sama?”

After I finished talking about what just happened, I heard a shocking comment from Reka, causing me to blink. I moved a piece on the chess-like board game I was playing with Athrun, then I looked over at Ratoka and had a simple exchange with him.

“Did you understand what Reka was talking about just now?”

“Nope, not at all.”

From the edge of my vision, I noticed that Tira was giggling, and even Athrun seemed to be looking at me as if I was a small child. It seems that only Ratoka and I don't understand what's going on.

"When the two of you first met, didn't you make him into your opponent?"

"It's because he was making fun of me. It seems that he's disliked me ever since then, so I've continued to treat him that way."

"That's, why it is. He also wants to make friends with Eliza-sama, but doesn't know how to do so. It's probably because he didn't have any friends to begin with. He has no idea how to become friends with Eliza-sama, nor does he know how to make up with friends after fighting."

...That extremely rude behavior is the only way Eric knows how to communicate?

"He tried to do something resembling an apology, correct?"

"He has an older brother, right? Maybe he doesn't know how to apologize for what he thinks are small things."

As expected of children that had somewhat more normal childhoods, I got the feeling that Reka's explanation was quite convincing.

...Noble children have a special environment growing up. Besides, Eric probably had a more unique environment than most, since his mother died five years ago. I honestly hadn't considered that it would cause his communication skills to drop so precipitously...

"...By the way, I don't have any intention of making friends with Archduke Dovadain's sons, you know."

"Eh, how come?"

"Other nobles are already unhappy that I received rewards from the king, if I try to get closer to a powerful family like the archduke's, it'll increase their negative feelings towards me even further. I still want to limit my bad reputation as much as possible."

"Mm... I see. Eric wants to be friends! But because of the adults around you, you can't

make friends with children your own age, such a sad story..."

Athrun who was having difficult figuring what move to make next in our chess-like game finally moved his knight. When I attacked his knight with my archer, Ratoka whispered something in Athrun's ear. Hey, giving advice isn't fair.

"Is that so? Even if I improve my relationship with Eric, I don't feel like I'd have much to talk with him about."

Tira joined our conversation as she poured some black tea for me. She also brought a small dish of confectioneries to go with the tea, so I took a baked good and placed it in my mouth, thinking about what she meant as I chewed.

"Is Eric's problematic behavior well known among nobles?"

"Hmm. The other nobles probably know about it through the servants that work here."

"What about the eldest son Grays, will Eliza-sama consider having a better relationship with him?"

I nodded at this question. In Grays' case, I feel like before the question of "do I want to make friends with him," there's this huge gap in our social statuses that's getting in the way.

"Given the current situation, any noble would think that the archduke family's power will be inherited by Grays, not Eric. In the first place, Eliza-sama was being cold to Eric in order to distance herself from the crown prince and Grays, right?"

"...Even if I make friends with Eric, I doubt that Grays' opinion of me would change, and it's really questionable if he'd be able to influence the crown prince... Nobles' viewpoints aren't that simple. No matter how bad Eric's reputation or evaluation is, he's still a member of the archduke's family, and there will be some sort of backlash if I get close to him."

"I see. Arxian nobles are so complicated, unlike the King's Spears in the Shiru tribe."

The former Artolas Kingdom was a country consisting of many ethnicities and didn't really have a nobility system, but something similar to nobles in social status existed there. Among the citizens of Artolas, the Shiru tribe was one of the closest related

tribes to their king. It seems that they often served the king directly.

“I don’t know how complex it really is, but it’s definitely a different way of thinking. The Arxian king has absolute power as the symbol of royal blood descended from the first king of the Holy Kingdom of Arxia, Ahar Xia. He doesn’t choose representatives from the most powerful clans to serve him, it’s quite a different system from our King’s Spears.”

“Worshiping the bloodline as sacred, it’s so inconceivable. Even though we’re all believers in the Xia sect, why are our customs so different?”

I shrugged my shoulders and dodged answering that last question. That’s a question for theologists, not for a domain lord that doesn’t even believe in this religion and only considers how she can use religion to her own advantage to help in ruling her domain.

“Ah, Athrun. You’re in check.”

“Damn it...”

Athrun and Ratoka simultaneously groaned as I moved my knight to attack their king. They’re still so weak. The only person who I’ve never defeated in this chess-like strategy game is Claudia.

CHAPTER 161

OUTSTANDING MARGRAVE

A margrave, this noble title is classified as a high rank in noble society. Margraves are usually given out as a title to nobles that maintain something critical to Arxia. For example, court nobles that work in the highest-ranking financial jobs, nobles with the most strategically important borders that need defending, or nobles with domains that produce a large amount of food eaten by everyone, or nobles with rare resources in their domain, these nobles will all be designated as margraves.

So, nobles that are margraves obtain their ranks differently from nobles that are earls. Only a handful of high-ranked nobles have the title of margrave.

Margrave Molton has his title because of rare resources in his domain. His previous generations were only lesser earls, but eventually the Molton domain began to develop and produce various gems, including two really rare gems called Esmeralts and Vardalias in this world, which is how he obtained his title.

“Thank you for coming tonight, Earl Kaldia. Usually I just stay by myself in my residence, and this is honestly just a tiny evening party, but I’ll be happy if you can enjoy yourself.”

“Of course, it’s my honor to be invited to your son’s birthday party, Lord Molton.”

The beautiful deep blue Vardalias matched his eye color on the jacket Margrave Molton was wearing, and as always, I found it difficult to believe he had a son the same age as me as he smiled brilliantly.

A building resembling a castle was standing behind him. I can’t imagine what it’s like for him to sleep there by himself. It’s definitely a residence befitting one of the few higher-ranked nobles. Its size and value completely outclass my former residence in the royal capital, as I was only a low-ranked viscountess back then.

“...So, why was it that you took the trouble of having me enter through the back entrance?”

For some reason, he had me come through the back door of this wonderful mansion. The margrave smiled mischievously, which I thought was rather cute.

“Actually, my beloved second son Lucius is the main character tonight, he’s quite a fan of yours. He’ll be entering noble school next year, and I was wondering if you could tell him some stories about it.”

And that’s what he said. I clutched at my head.

Even though he often travels in and out of the royal capital, I don’t know whether to say that his actions are a little strange, or that he just likes going at his own pace... I don’t know how to describe it, this was just so sudden.

His appearance and gentle personality are probably why the royal capital’s social circles treat him as an overly gaudy existence. He’s too sincere and direct. For a domain lord, his personality stands out too much.

“I wish you could have informed me of this earlier. I didn’t prepare any presents for him, after all.”

“It’s fine, there’s no need. You are his gift, after all. Since it’s not a busy time for nobles, I’m just asking you to do a little baby-sitting.”

“I’ll be troubled if you just give me away as you please. ...Also, any child that’s my fan must be an unusual one. My reputation should be infamous.”

While I casually chatted with Margrave Molton, he guided me to the room where Lucius was waiting for me. Even though my three young servants didn’t say anything, I could also detect their confusion as they followed behind us. I informed them beforehand that the margrave was a bit of a unique character, but they probably don’t realize just how different he is because they haven’t interacted with any nobles from the royal capital yet.

A young child who seemed almost pale with nervousness was waiting together with his older brother Zephyr who was being a good brother and trying to calm him down. This child is probably Lucius. He also has his father's silver hair, he's got even clearer emerald-green eyes than Zephyr, but his face must resemble his mother, he looks almost feminine.

“...Ahh, Zephyr. I’m no good after all. When I think about how to do a greeting, my chest keeps hurting...”

“It’ll be fine. Lucius, you can do it. You’re much better than last year. Didn’t our tutor praise you as well?”

“But brother, she always scolds me to speak more clearly like you, without stuttering... I can’t do it well. I think it’s impossible for me.”

“When you give your greeting, father and I will be by your side. That’s why you can calm down and not worry about things. Yep, take a deep breath, exhale, inhale, inhale, inhale-”

Lucius continued to take deep breaths to the limit of what his lungs could handle, but then he began coughing, and he glared at Zephyr with tears in his eyes. Zephyr handled it with a cool expression and a mischievous smile, looking almost exactly like Margrave Molton from earlier.

Zephyr and his father give off really different impressions, but their behavior is so similar. Shouldn’t it usually be the reverse?

“Hey Zephyr, don’t get Lucius into a bad mood before he has to come to the hallway, you know?”

Margrave Molton was chuckling with laughter as he spoke up. The brothers looked up and noticed their father, and froze solid when they saw me standing behind him as well. Well, I’m sure it would be surprising since their father suddenly brought me in unannounced through their back door.

Besides, I had refused Zephyr’s earlier invitation to his place. It’s completely his father’s fault that I ended up coming here after all.

I was a little lost on what I should do, but I ended up waving to Zephyr who was still frozen solid.

“...Kaldia?”

“Good evening, Zephyr.”

“Eh, eh? What’s going on? I thought you said you had something else to do today?”

“Ahh, yes, something else to do. It’s because I was invited by a certain jokester father, to apparently come and attend his second son’s birthday celebration, that’s why.”

Sorry, I can’t go, I had rejected his invitation a few days ago. Hey, don’t stare so seriously at me, even I didn’t know what your father was thinking. I’m confused as well, but with things as it is I can only go along with whatever Margrave Molton says now.

“...Father?”

“Hm? I invited and brought over my friend, isn’t that something natural?”

While Margrave Molton had this wonderful smile, I was amazed to the extent of wanting to hide my face. He’s such a no-good father, both spoiling his children so much and playing so many jokes on them.

However, he seemed to have a proper trusting parent-child relationship with them. Even an outsider like me could tell that Zephyr wasn’t actually frustrated at his father’s harmless although tasteless joke, even if he looked a bit dissatisfied.

Actually, I’m just a little bit envious of them.



As an aside, Zephyr told me that his brother Lucius was quite sickly and couldn’t quite manage having a conversation with me, so I ended up spending some time chatting with Zephyr.

Well, maybe it was better after all that I didn’t prepare a present. Seeing the current situation, he might have difficulties even with basic greetings.

After Lucius got over his nervousness though, he was able to channel his excitement into a better direction, and he properly gave his greetings. The margrave seems to understand his children well and is skilled at dealing with them. I truly apologize for thinking he was a little strange. As expected of the outstanding margrave. He has such a way with children and their worries.

CHAPTER 162

BEFORE I REALIZED IT, I EXPERIENCED A FAMILY RELATIONSHIP

“...Mm, delicious. I never thought that I’d be able to taste fish and other seafood from the northwestern Fushobari region in the royal capital.”

“Is it good? I’m glad to hear that you enjoy it. As for the fish... chances to eat it are limited, as it’s a bit difficult to transport fish all the way to the royal capital. If you go closer to the sea, there’s even more delicious foods that you can taste there.”

“It must taste even fresher there.”

“Yep. Cut the fish into thin pieces, grill it, and season it with rume vinegar. It’s out of this world, how delicious it is.”

“Gerberries and oinocera oil also go wonderfully with fish.”

Rumes and gerberries are some strongly sour fruits that grow in the northern Fushobari and Ugaria regions, they can be made into fruit jams, processed into vinegar, or even cooked into fruit pies.

“I see,” I nodded, and I remembered a similar taste from my previous world, a drink called lemonade. Even though I can’t recall the specific game scenarios clearly anymore, my mind is coming up with such an insignificant memory now, it’s amazing how it works. Well, in my past life I had only played this game as a way to pass some time, it’s only natural that it would be easier to remember things from my daily life.

“And, here’s a rume pie. You still have enough room to try it, right?”

“Ahh, I’ve heard of it, but never tasted it before. I shall try indulging myself.”

“Okay,” Zephyr gave me a slice of pie, and seemed to exchange an expression like he was trying to hold back his laughter with Lucius. Although I was a bit dubious, I placed the pie into my mouth, and chewed.

“....., ..Nn....!!”

An unimaginably sour taste started spreading out in my mouth all at once. The sourness was stronger than anything I've ever tasted. It's such a sharp taste. Well, it's not so strong that it will linger on in my mouth, but it's so acidic.

At seeing my reaction, Zephyr exploded into laughter. Although I almost thought about glaring at him, I changed my mind, smoothed out my facial expression, and decided to pick up the remaining part of my pie slice. Since the pie was also considerably sweetened, once I got used to the sourness it was actually quite delectable.

“Kaldia, what do you think? Is it savory?”

“...I was a bit shocked at how sour it was, but yes, it's quite scrumptious.”

“Everyone who tries rume for the first time reacts just like how you did. I'm sorry, but if I told you how sour it was, you would have been mentally prepared and it wouldn't have seemed as sour. That pie's main flavor isn't even the sourness of the rume, anyways.”

“Since young children are forbidden from eating rumes, everyone in the Fushobari region tries it for the first time around the time they become a teenager. I tried it for the first time myself just a few days ago, but unlike you, I gave a loud shout at how sour it was.”

“Ah, I see,” as I responded, Lucius offered me some wine to wash the taste out of my mouth. It was definitely delicious, but I definitely felt a need to rinse the sour acid out of my mouth.

...This, I have an idea. I absolutely have to make my double Ratoka try this. I won't stand for being the only one to experience this sourness. Although, it was both sour and mouthwatering at the same time.

“Zephyr-sama, Lucius-sama.”

A girl that seemed like she was a teenager held the hems of her dress and approached us at this moment. Judging by the emblem embroidered in her dress, she must be from a branch family of the Moltons. Zephyr and Lucius welcomed their relative warmly, and briefly introduced her to me. However, is her social status a bit low I wonder, I

only learned that her name was Irche.

“Alright then, Irche. What’s the matter?”

“The master is in the main hall and has a message for you. He says it’s about time to come to the ballroom for the dance. After the pavane dance, the two of you are to go to the great dining hall... Especially Lucius-sama, since you’re the main character for tonight, please spend a little more time in the dance hall.”

Zephyr and Lucius were smiling ambiguously. ...Um, maybe I’m not good at reading this expression, but doesn’t this mean that they think it’s troublesome? I see Margrave Molton hovering around the House of Lords every time there’s a discussion about jewelry taxes on the agenda as well.

“...Well, birthday celebrations are basically dance parties at this age.”

As I muttered my concurrence with Irche’s statement, Zephyr took my arm with a smile as if he had thought up of some good idea. Huh?

“Earl Kaldia, please come attend together with us. Today there will be many beautiful young ladies gathering at the Molton residence tonight, so I would like to use this chance to announce to them all that there’s already a girl that I’m taken by.”

“...Very well. I’m saving myself for Rashiok, though... Jokes aside, I might as well go to the dance hall together with you. Since Margrave Molton went to the trouble of inviting me, I’d feel bad about staying in the dining hall for the entire time.”

I made a joke that came from the classical literature I had been reading recently in class. While socializing in the dance hall is a bit bothersome, Zephyr and Lucius should be more accustomed to it than me, and it might not be bad to go with them as their friend.

Although come to think of it, aren’t those words that are usually said to a girl you intend to marry? I’m someone who always wears male clothing though, and I’ve never even thought about marriage.

“Earl Kaldia, who might be this Rashiok person you speak of?”

“Oh, he’s my draconis, a magical beast that I’m raising. Of course, I was just joking

when I said I was saving myself for him."

When I entered the dance hall together with Zephyr and Lucius, all the noble girls' gazes gathered upon us at an amazing speed. I was being pierced by so many glares that I think I would have been dead if this had been a battlefield. In some ways, it's scarier than armed enemy soldiers.

...Although they're the hosts, I suppose I must acknowledge that Zephyr and Lucius were more popular with girls than I realized. At noble school, maybe Zephyr pales in comparison to the crown prince's features, but his beautiful silver hair and azure eyes from his father probably cause him to be adored by many girls. Actually, it's unusual for his appearance to be inconspicuous. Meaning, the crown prince just stands out by a ridiculous amount.

In order to not be bothered by all the noble girls, I took half a step away from the others.

"Uh, um, Zephyr-sama. Who might this be?"

However, before I could get any further, I heard Zephyr introducing me. Ehh, why me? As the hosts, they need to use me to block this wall of flowers, are they that desperate?

Zephyr ended up introducing me to the flock of girls as his classmate. I wonder if they know my infamy, the teenaged girls stepped back from me and some hid their faces with fans, but all the girls that appeared my age came closer to me for some reason...

"E, Earl Einstark, could you dance one time with me..."

"No, um, please do me the honor of having this dance!"

"Hey! Didn't you girls say you were going to dance with Margrave Molton first!"

"Earl, do you like the sarabande dance? I'm confident about my sarabande dancing!"

Oof, I was pressured with invitations to dance from all sides, as I managed to take another half step. Then I was able to put one step's distance between us.

"As expected of the earl that everyone in the royal capital is paying attention to. You have so many other admirers, apart from myself."

Lucius seemed to be pleased with all the adulation I was receiving for some reason. No, I think you're the one that's strange here for admiring someone with as bad a reputation as me. The reason why I'm a hot topic in the royal capital was because of my cruelty, there's no reason to admire anything there.

Look at this, these girls all have expressions like they're on the battlefield, fighting over me. This is probably nothing more than nobles that want to make a connection with me for their own ends, no matter if I'm good or bad, just because everyone has been talking about me.

CHAPTER 163

THE NOBLE SCHOOL'S UPPER-LEVEL SECTION, PART 1

One day, when my classes were over and I returned to my dormitory, I noticed that Reka didn't come out to greet me from the servants' living area. I noticed a young boy that was one of Zephyr's servants rushing over towards me, does he have a message for me from Reka, is he busy with something?

"Earl Kaldia...! Your servant, he went to the upper-level section of the noble school...!"

He seemed out of breath, so first I told him to take a seat and calm down. I told him to catch his breath, so he obediently started taking deep breaths.

"And, why exactly was it that Reka went to the upper-level section?"

"...Okay. He was ordered to return a book to the library in the upper-level section, or else... The one who ordered Reka was the son of the Innefort family."

"Innefort... He's a northern noble. Got it. I thank you from my heart, for your generosity in letting me know."

After giving my gratitude to Zephyr's servant who was still catching his breath, I headed for the upper-level section as quickly as my feet would take me.

For school life, it's common for servants to go around everywhere to assist in things such as classroom or food preparation.

Of course, there are rooms just for servants, and there are some that go around with their servants at all times when they're not in class, but the majority of nobles and their servants will move separately most of the time.

Because there are many lower-ranked nobles that are friendly with their servants, it seems that it's often the case that some nobles will hang out together with their servants as friends. Higher-ranked nobles typically don't even notice the existence of

commoner servants, so they wouldn't even think of going around together with their servants, and they're much less likely to have servants with them when going from class to class.

And, even if all servants are commoners, there's an unwritten rule that students shouldn't give orders to other students' servants.

The classes are divided based on academic ability, and that's supposed to be used to judge the students rather than noble rank in theory, but there's always going to be those types from the higher-ranked nobles that enjoy things like harassing the lower-ranked nobles' servants.

...However, unwritten laws are unwritten laws. It's just something that nobles set up out of respect for each other, but it's not an actual rule that must be followed.

As I kept heading in the direction of the upper-level section in search of Reka, I passed many horses on the wide school grounds.

The upper-level section allows adult servants to accompany the nobles there. If Reka who's just a child goes there, he'll be treated as a commoner without the protection of his master. If he's unlucky, he might encounter some nasty noble who will cause an incident.

-As expected, after it became widely known about the conflict between Eric and me, factions started forming among the students.

The fact that the crown prince and Grays have been absent from school for so long is also a cause, but it also means I still have time to resolve this somehow before they return. Factions appeared because Eric and Sieghart were both originally influential members of the crown prince's retinue, and I took the attitude that it had nothing to do with me, but I've already been caught up in the middle of it all.

The current situation is that the Kaldia faction, including Sieghart, has a great majority, and the students in Eric's faction are being excluded. For example, the seats in the cafeteria. Using the power of numbers, those in Eric's factions are forced to sit in the corners and the seats for lower-ranked nobles.

There's no thought involved in this factional struggle at all. It's nothing more than a noble power game, the desire to be better than someone else using the advantage of

numbers or noble ranking. And for me whose name has been put onto this faction as the head, it's something I really don't want.

After all, there's no benefits in this for me whatsoever, but the negative feelings from those being bullied in Eric's faction will all concentrate on me. And now, the end result is that they're breaking an unwritten rule, in order to harass my servant. While cursing under my breath, I grabbed the reins of a horse.

CHAPTER 164

THE NOBLE SCHOOL'S UPPER-LEVEL SECTION, PART 2

Unlike noble school which is compulsory education for all noble children, the upper-level section is for those that wish to continue their studies even further. There are three types of students there. First are those that are studying to become instructors themselves, or high-level civil officials. Some other students are studying research and development in various fields. And the last type is, those that are granted special permission to stay at school for an extra period of time, if they haven't found anything to do as a noble yet.

There are exams that must be taken for the first two types of students, but there's none for the last category. And unlike noble school, the upper-level section doesn't have a term limit.

Of course, some people will actively search for jobs, especially within the royal palace, but noble society basically depends on your connections and achievements. Meaning, the third type of students in the upper-level section are those that have been mostly abandoned by their families, considered as too troublesome, and just remain at noble school.

...Well, they haven't truly been abandoned by their families, because they would have been forced into the monastery if that was the case, so these students still have some hope. And so, these students that remain here at the noble school's upper-level section mostly have a rank of earl or higher.

Whatever the case, the upper-level section has a group of students with reasons to be dissatisfied with the way their life is going. These students are considered problematic, to the extent where even the House of Lords has had discussions about them before. This is due to them often causing violent incidents against the servants of lower-ranking nobles.

Students at noble school typically have very little contact with students in the upper-level section. While we're all in the same school, the school grounds are so vast that

there's a great amount of distance between our dormitories and their section. Occasionally however, our servants and their servants might interact with each other.

It's difficult for lower-ranked nobles to complain directly about higher-ranked nobles. Especially if it's only for what's considered as a small matter, such as injuring some commoner servants.

“Reka!!”

I finally found Reka a little ways off the forest path between the dorms and the upper section, a place where nobody hardly ever went. This was the first time I've ever been thankful for having uselessly acute hearing. Thanks to hearing the soft sounds of people talking, I was able to find Reka through the maze of trees.

Reka was lying on the ground, surrounded by some teenagers that appeared to be servants. He was wheezing in pain from his chest, and I also saw blood dripping down from his head. The teenagers around him appeared quite buff, and it was evident from their appearance that they were northerners. When they noticed me, I could see their strong contempt for me in their eyes.

In the group of teenagers, only one boy was standing in front of Reka as if to protect him from the others, and he looked at me with no particular emotion in his eyes at all. His eyes are purple, a rare gemstone-like color. I feel like I've seen them before –

“Humph, let's go.”

When I returned to my senses, it was already too late. The teenagers escaped into the woods and ran off. It's going to be difficult to follow them on horseback, nor is there any meaning to catching just one or two of them.

Besides, Reka who's lying prone on the ground is more important. I jumped off of my horse, and I kneeled next to Reka, by the purple-eyed boy's side. I called Reka's name, but he didn't respond. It seems that he's unconscious.

“Wait a moment, it's better not to move him. I think he may have a concussion, because they were beating his head.”

The boy next to me spoke up, and I agreed with his assessment. I inspected his injuries, checked his breathing, and focused on ascertaining his current condition.

“.....Eh, what’s going on?”

“Reka, you’ll be alright. Don’t move yet.”

Fortunately, Reka finally woke up. As for what happened to him, Reka was much calmer about it than I expected, and I confirmed that he wasn’t in any confusion although he had a headache. I gave him an order to lie there for a little while longer and rest.

Reka’s cheeks were red and swollen. As the purple-eyed boy said, it definitely seems like they were beating his face, which could have caused a concussion.

“Just rest there quietly for a while. If your head keeps hurting, I can call for someone to come get us.”

“...Nn, okay.”

He obediently laid there and slightly nodded, while I took off my coat and used it as a pillow for him. I was going to change out my coat soon anyway, so I don’t mind if it gets dirty. Even though I became an earl, I found it too bothersome to change my coat’s design, so as expected in the end Earl Terejia gave me a lecture about it...

When I stood up, the honorable purple-eyed boy who was waiting patiently for me spoke up lightly.

“...I never would have imagined that I’d meet you again.”

Although there was the shadow of something melancholy in his expression, he laughed gently. “Ahh,” I nodded in response to him.

I see, he’s – the hidden capture target of the otome game, named Alb, whose settings and story I didn’t know, he must have been a student from the upper-level section.

CHAPTER 165

SHADOWY VIOLET GEMS

“...So you’ve become a student. It’s good that you were able to leave the monastery.”

“Yes, that’s so. I concur.”

I used words that would probably be safe to say, and he nodded. However, a tinge of darkness remained in his voice. He must still have a complicated family situation. Considering that he was forced into a monastery when he was only a child before, there must be some difficult unavoidable things in his life even after several years have passed.

“...I didn’t enjoy my life in the monastery.”

He suddenly added on that comment, and I nodded ambiguously.

Well, of course it’s only natural. I don’t really know the details of life at a monastery, but much like my previous world, it’s an ascetic, austere lifestyle of giving up one’s desires and serving others. If he was forced to join the monastery, instead of going of his own free will, of course he wouldn’t like it.

“Your servant, will his injuries be alright? It seemed like his opponents were also commoners.”

“His head has stopped bleeding, and I think he’ll be okay. No bones are broken either”

Then I thanked him for helping my servant, and he smiled. While his smile was elegant, it also seemed lifeless and fatigued, he’s giving me the same impression as our first meeting. I couldn’t help but think about why he would feel that way, but unfortunately as I didn’t know anything about him, I couldn’t do anything about the bad taste I was feeling.

It feels like his gloominess has increased since the time I met him at the monastery, and it reminded me of the heavy atmosphere when my citizens were all glaring at me when I first became their domain lord and met them.

...However, he's not one of my citizens. I cut away my growing sympathy towards him. I'm the lord of Kaldia. I can't afford to care about others equally if they aren't my citizens.

I think the last time I met him was approximately four years ago. I'm a little relieved that I still think the same way, that my citizens are the most important to me.

Well, the conversation's died down. However, I want to have Reka resting for a while longer. I can't leave here, I'm going to have to stay here until this boy in front of me leaves. I'm feeling an uncomfortable silence between us now since I cut away my sympathy for his situation, and I don't know what to talk about as we barely have any connection to each other at all.

“...Did you enter noble school this spring? Or was it one year ago?”

In the end, he was the one who spoke up first again.

“It was this spring.”

“I see. Then, that's quite a big deal. This year's freshman students include an incredible number of influential students.”

“...Ahh, that's right.”

Well, I'm here right now in this forest precisely because of their influence, my voice came out softly as I was thinking that. Maybe he detected something from my tone of voice, he moved his line of sight from Reka directly to me.

“What type of person... is the crown prince? Is he just like a royal priceless treasure that's been protected in the castle for all his life?”

He immediately looked aside again. It seems like he really wants to keep this conversation going. Maybe he has no intention of getting involved with the factions that have been forming recently, or perhaps it's not well known in the upper-level section, he started out by asking a question about the crown prince who's been absent on business for such a long time.

Well then, how to answer him. I don't know what his opinion of the crown prince is, so I'll have to choose my words carefully.

“...He seems to be suited for the position of crown prince. No matter where he goes, he’s the center of attention. I think that’s a difficult quality to find.”

“I’ve heard myself that he’s by far the most handsome prince in the history of the royal family. But, I’ve never seen him at all, even once. ...It’s difficult for me to imagine just what his appearance must be like. For example, I think that you as well also have an excellent face that would break the hearts of countless girls.”

Break the hearts of countless girls, just what does that mean? I didn’t think I had such an appearance that would cause such a commotion...

I don’t really get if he’s praising me or insulting me, it’s an odd feeling. While my appearance that’s inherited from my father may indeed be considered beautiful by normal standards, I feel like it’s far from the feminine beauty of women, and besides, I hate this face from the bottom of my heart, so I can’t think of it as an excellent appearance.

“I’m nothing in comparison to the crown prince. The crown prince is skilled in every area, he’s an excellent person.”

Well, just like everyone else, my face with my father’s features is nothing compared to the crown prince’s handsome appearance. Looks, noble ranking, academic ability, the crown prince is top level in every aspect, he’s got a much better reputation than a certain infamous upstart domain lord.

“...I see, is that the case.”

However, he only tilted his head slightly, while the shadow in his purple eyes seemed to get darker.

“Apart from the crown prince, there’s one other first-year student that everyone has their attention on. An excellent lady who even has the attention of the prime minister and king.”

“Lady?”

I tilted my head. I’ve never heard of such a girl.

“...You’ve never heard of her?”

“I’ve never heard anything like that at noble school. Is she someone from the royal family?”

The boy shook his head saying no. Then, it must be the daughter of some duke’s family. If even the king and prime minister are paying attention to her, it must be a noble from the royal capital.

“Maybe due to the crown prince, she doesn’t stand out as much in comparison. I heard that she was rewarded for her achievements on the battlefield, though...”

Achievements on the battlefield, so maybe it’s someone related to the Rolentsors. The war with Rindarl has been dragging on for quite some time, so there’s many people that have received accolades in battle, so I can’t narrow it down just with this.

For women, there are some that will be in charge of combat strategy, even if they don’t personally fight on the battlefield. Both boys and girls in the Rolentsor family for example receive an education in military strategy and martial arts, so it wouldn’t be strange if this girl was from an excellent military family...

“Is the crown prince really more outstanding than this lady? The girl’s the same age as the crown prince, but will he stand for it if he loses to her in combat strategy? What do you think?”

“...Indeed. The crown prince was raised up to the position of heir over the first prince in an uncertain situation. Isn’t it natural to expect so?”

I couldn’t help but avoid his eyes. I felt a chill running down my spine, and regretted saying what I did.

Almost imperceptibly deep in his eyes, when he opened his eyes slightly, I noticed an incredibly dark emotion bursting out from within.

【 PART III 】

CHAPTER 166

THE ARCHDUKE FAMILY'S SITUATION, PART 3

“Eh, Reka will remain here? Why...”

“Claudia and Bellway are coming to give me a report on the current state of Kaldia, and they’ll attend Grays’ birthday party with me. Athrun, Reka, and Ratoka will take a day off to rest on that day. Tira will be with me as my maid. I’ll give her an extra vacation day later.”

I was making preparations for the archduke family’s evening party in three days, chatting with Athrun and Tira. When I told them that everyone but Tira would be resting, Tira appeared confused. She’s probably feeling uneasy about having to attend an evening party without her childhood friends.

“...Vacation?”

Athrun tilted his head. ...Ahh, come to think of it, there’s no concept of vacation in this world. Regardless of your social status, working is considered a part of life, and there’s no such thing as taking extended breaks.

“I mean that you won’t have any work to do and you can use your time freely as you please. If you want, you can take a walk outside the school, or just relax in the dorms. Just, please tell me what you intend to do by tomorrow.”

Well, it’s not like they’ll have no work whatsoever... and honestly, I wanted to take Reka along with me. The evening party at the archduke’s family residence will be huge, and most students at noble school will be attending. Of course, this includes Innefort who was responsible causing the incident with Reka.

Although Reka wasn’t injured seriously, the memory of many people surrounding and beating him still hasn’t healed.

“Understood. I’ll let Reka and Ratoka know.”

I didn’t directly say out loud that it would be safer for the three of them to be together,

but they seem to have realized this as they nodded. Especially if they want to go out and explore the royal capital, I definitely hope none of them goes alone.

“As Tira is a maid, I think that she’ll be going outside of noble school for various things more often than Reka and Athrun in the future. I hope that she can get used to it with this opportunity.”

“Eh, but... Isn’t it unusual for nobles to bring servants along when going to a party for nobles?”

“Well, it’s expected for those that become earls. Earl Terejia did that as well. Even if I haven’t been an earl for even a year yet, the ranking still trumps over the fact that I’m still a student and not an adult. And Claudia and Bellway are adults that come from noble families, so there shouldn’t be a problem.”

Tira nodded in understanding. She’s a Shiru girl, which already was a position of authority in her old Artolas Kingdom, but it’s still difficult for her to get accustomed to the Arxian nobles that just won’t shut up about noble ranking.

As I am a girl, after I become an adult, I’ll no longer be required to wear this type of ceremonial male clothing, and I’ll be expected to wear dresses. When that happens, I can already guess at the shower of criticism that me and my servants will be receiving when I don’t change my clothing style.

Men are the only ones in this society that are supposed to do jobs like bodyguards and combat positions, and noble girls are supposed to have female servants, with noble boys having male servants. That’s why, Tira’s education as a maid is more important than Reka’s. I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to use Ratoka as my maid “Elise,” he might grow to look less feminine one day in the future.

Although, in noble school, I need to attend many almost exclusively male classes, that teach you how to be a proper domain lord, so Reka’s needed there, but... I can’t expect Tira whose work is to be my maid to do things like prepare my weapons or lead my horse for me. Although, Tira herself is superbly skilled at handling horses. I still have to consider appearances and what people will think to some extent.

The archduke’s residence is on the corner of the royal palace grounds. It’s adjacent to Arktoria castle which is used for administrative purposes and the House of Lords. It’s less than half of Arktoria castle’s size, and is known as Dovadain castle... it was

originally used as a place for visiting foreign royalty to rest at, but after the construction of Arktoria castle which could also serve that purpose, and the fact that Arxia stopped having diplomatic relationships with most other countries according to its isolationist policy, it's a castle that was repurposed for the archduke's family.

Eric's birthday is in autumn, while Grays' is in spring. This is actually the first time that I'm visiting Dovadain castle, since I'm usually absent from the royal capital for my domain's harvesting season, and I've been busy with the Rindarl war lately.

Lebrecht, the third son of the Dovadain family, is Grays' younger brother, but because Eric is older, Lebrecht is treated as the third son instead of the second. It's clear to see that being close to the crown prince has its benefits for Eric, there are rumors in the House of Lords already that Lebrecht is highly likely to go abroad from Arxia in the future.

Since Eric was already a part of the crown prince's retinue even before entering noble school, it's likely that he can become a king's aide in the future, but Lebrecht doesn't have that option. Although Eric is treated the same as a legitimate child, the chances of him inheriting the archduke family's power are quite low. Even his cousin, the Crown Prince Alfred, is higher in the succession order than he is. And Lebrecht is second in the line of succession after Grays, so Lebrecht is basically treated as a backup in case anything happens to Grays, and everybody knows this.

"Lebrecht-sama goes out in public even less than Eric-sama does, and this will be the first time that all three brothers will be appearing in public at the same venue."

"Have Grays and Eric appeared together in public before they became teenagers?"

"Yes. At the ceremony for the Royal Army last year, the two of them attended together with the crown prince."

I nodded and said "I see" to Bellway, and thought a bit about Lebrecht. No matter how much I dug into my memories, I couldn't recall hearing his name before from anywhere.

According to my memories from the otome game, I only knew about "two sons" from the archduke's family and didn't see Lebrecht's name. In the game, the only people from the archduke's family that appeared were the archduke, Grays, and Eric, just these three people. If I take into consideration the game's timeframe which is

supposed to begin next year... it means that next year, Lebrecht should have become a noble school student together with us, but he wasn't in the game.

I can't remember the details like what was in the game's conversations or the names of all the characters, but... I'm certain that there wasn't a character like Lebrecht in the game.

Of course, I've met many important and influential people that weren't mentioned in the game before, but Lebrecht is a special exception I need to pay attention to. He's the younger brother of two of the main characters, Grays and Eric, and he's someone who should be attending noble school soon, but for some disconcerting reason, he never went to school in the game.

...I can't stop myself from thinking about the game scenario even though my memories are hazy after so many years have passed, maybe I'm just an idiot.

CHAPTER 167

THE SECRETARY BELLWAY HAS BETTER ACTING SKILLS THAN I EXPECTED

The party I'm attending at the archduke's residence is on a much larger scale than any I've ever been to. Only the royal family would be able to host a larger party, but they're usually more frugal, so the archduke family's party is the grandest in all of Arxia.

The venue where the party is to take place is so large that I feel my huge mansion back in Kaldia could easily fit into this huge courtyard, that has plenty of space for all the nobles to gather here in its hallways, its dining hall, salon, and even game room. ...It's a bit dizzying to think about, I believe just this place's maintenance costs must exceed Kaldia's annual tax revenue. These were all originally constructed into Dovadain castle as this place was intended to entertain foreigners that wouldn't be taking part in Arxia's evening parties.

"Eliza-dono, they even have the incredibly rare Barcova meat here! As expected of the archduke's party."

"I know, but please act a little more restrained, Claudia-sama. Don't forget that you're supposed to be a maid here..."

This place is so large, that I haven't seen any nobles I'm acquainted with yet. Bellway was scolding Claudia whose eyes were sparkling at all the food available here, while I had Ratoka bring an appropriate amount of food for me and I sat down in an empty area to rest.

Before the time comes to greet the archduke's family, there's still a few things I need to take care of. I might as well fill my stomach while I'm at it. -I'm not used to this type of venue, my red eyes definitely won't sparkle like Claudia's.

"There are waiters that will bring food to your table."

Ratoka who was dressed as my male servant today, brought us back some juice and drank together with us. It seems that there are servants just for the purpose of being

servers for tonight's party so that the nobles can enjoy their food in luxury without having to move. If the master gives permission, it seems that they can even join the dance.

The rules are quite different at a party of such a large scale. This is because most of the invited guests have brought their family members and servants tonight.

In Arxia, according to law titled nobles and their close relatives are the center of legal relationships, for example before Claudia being my knight, she's still a member of the Rolentsor family, or that knights' daughters and younger sisters will also be recognized as nobility. Bellway's from a noble background, but he's from a branch family that's too distantly related and thus doesn't have noble status, and since several generations have passed in his family without a noble title, his family's been deprived of noble status.

These strict laws are in place to prevent the needless expansion of the noble class and diluting its worth, but it also complicates the relationship with servants in noble society. Considering that some servants are also the younger children of noble families, it's impossible to prohibit all servants from participating in eating and drinking. But just because a servant is highly educated, it's still difficult to tell if the servant is from a noble family. So that's why, at most evening parties, servants are also allowed to eat and drink, as well as dance, while serving the guests at the same time.

"Well, since Eliza-dono usually lets me eat whatever I want, this is just normal for me. We really have such a good boss, don't we, Bernard-dono."

"Ahh, yes, indeed so. Eliza-sama is such a generous person. By the way, my name is Bellway."

I felt almost nostalgic listening to their interaction, as I began trying some of the food the servants brought to me. Ratoka also tried something he was interested in, sticking his silverware into the food, and it disappeared instantly down his mouth as he ate ravenously.

Considering the special task I'm about to have him do for me, I have to give him this kind of allowance. After we ate and drank whatever we wanted, I handed my glass of juice to Ratoka, and lightly tapped his arm.

Ratoka stood up while continuing to eat, and took a step backwards. Then, he just

happened to collide with a servant passing by, and both of them tripped and fell.

They only fell on their butts lightly. The sound wasn't loud, but the remaining juice from my glass splashed out from Ratoka's hand with a splishing sound, onto the clothes of two people sitting on the marble floor.

Bellway hurriedly jumped up and assisted in place of Ratoka with wiping off the juice. The servant seemed a bit stunned. Bellway asked the two people if they were injured, while making his face red with embarrassment as he kept bowing apologetically. Then, he roughly dragged Ratoka up, as Ratoka was still sitting stunned on the ground, looking at the servant.

"This is all because you were way too careless. Making such a mistake like this – how dare you stain our master's name with mud."

Because of Bellway's loud scolding, curious gazes were beginning to look in our direction.

"I, I'm so sorry -"

"This is his excellency the archduke's castle, don't open your mouth without permission, you low commoner. -It was a mistake to have someone as stupid as you become a servant. You've caused the clothes that you were given to become dirty. Don't show your face in front of me again, until these two nobles' clothes, and your own have been cleaned of any stains!"

He's saying those words quite naturally. I used my deceased father as a reference for Bellway's lines. His attitude of treating his servants like this without losing control of his emotions, always felt so harsh and uncaring, rather than just being cold.

The servant seemed confused as Bellway kept apologizing and asking for permission to use the archduke's castle facilities to clean the clothes, but he ended up showing Ratoka the way. Ratoka continued to fake being in a daze, as he disappeared from my line of sight.

Now then, his communication skills have surely improved from a few years ago, so will Ratoka be able to achieve my goal today, I wonder.

CHAPTER 168

ABOUT THE SOUTHERN COUNTRIES

After quite some time had passed, it was finally time for the organizers and host of this party, the archduke's family, to come out and greet everyone. Because there were so many guests, as an upstart lesser earl, I was fairly far back in the greeting order.

"Greetings and salutations, Your Excellency the Archduke. It is such a great honor to be invited to your son Grays' birthday party tonight. I would like to take this opportunity to offer a prayer to Misorua for your son Lebrecht-sama as well, and also the entire Dovadain family, for your continued good fortune."

"I shall gratefully accept, Earl Einsbark."

"It's a joyous occasion that you are able to be here tonight for the sake of me and my brothers. We can all relax here tonight, free from the pressures of noble school. I hope that you will enjoy the remaining entertainment planned for tonight."

The archduke had the same blue eyes as his sons and only briefly responded to me, while Grays took over the rest and lightly gave me a formal prepared greeting as required by etiquette. Eric who was standing a little behind them avoided my gaze and didn't say anything, and the archduke's wife sitting next to him also remained silent, while Lebrecht was sitting in the center gave me the impression that he was very uncomfortable being here. Because Eric wasn't hiding it, it was obvious to see even though this was a public venue that there was some discord within the family.

Even after leaving from where the archduke's family was sitting, I observed them for a while longer at a distance. As they greeted other nobles, it seems that all of them had some interaction with each other, except for the archduke's wife, she never spoke to Eric. Even if there was something, she would only nod, and I could tell even at a distance that she had a tense expression.

"-Oh, isn't this Lord Kaldia, I mean, Earl Einsbark."

Suddenly a voice interrupted my thoughts and a familiar face entered my sight. It's Cornell, the youngest son of Margrave Freche. He was escorting his fiancee Feria

Rogshia, and happened so see me so he came over to greet me. I was a bit surprised that Margrave Freche's third son would be invited, but then I noticed some people that looked like Cornell's two older brothers behind him. I recall that both his brothers should be barons. Which means, since Cornell doesn't have a title yet, he should be here accompanying them.

"How have you been, Earl Einsbark?"

"...It's been quite a while, Cornell-dono, Feria-dono. Because it's easy to get confused with the other members of the Einsbark family, you can just call me Kaldia like before."

"I see, then I'll call you Earl Kaldia. I didn't think that I'd meet you here. I had been wanting to contact you recently."

"What is it that you wanted?"

If he wanted to contact me, I can only imagine that it must have something to do with their upcoming marriage. But just because of their marriage's situation, I doubt that Margrave Freche would ask me about it.

"Even in the Freche region, we're well aware of Earl Kaldia's achievements on the eastern border. -My father seems to be concerned about the assorted smaller southern countries. He wanted to contact and discuss some things with the Jugfena region domain lords."

The assorted smaller southern countries... I tilted my head at the unexpected topic.

Although Kaldia is on the eastern border, so I mostly pay attention to the situation with our eastern neighbors, in truth only the Genas domain separates Kaldia from the southern border as well. Although, the threat from the southern countries is much lesser compared to Rindarl.

The southern countries are too small in size, even if they ally together, they wouldn't be much of a threat to Arxia. Among those countries, there's too many new countries appearing as well as old countries being destroyed due to constant infighting, that development is far behind there, and their soldiers, citizens, and resources are all exhausted.

"Is there a country that's suddenly become powerful, is that why he's concerned?"

“Ahh. Apparently, Rindarl is intervening in the southern countries’ wars. On Rindarl’s southeast border, some countries have become Rindarl’s vassal states.”

Intervention. It’s something that the isolationist Arxia would never come up with. In the first place, when thinking about national defense, it’s convenient for Arxia if other countries are constantly at war with each other, and it’s more advantageous if the southern countries continue to rise and fall, so there was no reason to intervene in their affairs. Although, in accordance to Arxia’s national laws and religion, Arxia doesn’t do anything to purposefully intensify their conflicts either.

“If you have the spare time, I’d like to hear more details on this right away.”

“Got it. I can leave greeting the archduke to my older brothers, let’s go meet my father.”

“Wait a moment. The person who wanted to talk to me wasn’t you, it was Margrave Freche?”

I’m shocked that Margrave Freche wanted to talk to me personally. I was even slightly impolite, forgetting etiquette in my surprise. But, Cornell nodded affirmatively, saying “father said that would be good for him.”

I don’t know how Margrave Freche would benefit from talking to me, but margraves have their own interests to consider. As long as there’s no disadvantages for me, it won’t hurt me to hear what he has to say.

“...Got it, let’s go.”

CHAPTER 169

A DEMON'S MACHINATIONS

There's no accurate map of the assorted southern countries. Countries' borders change daily, along with the appearance or disappearance of new and old countries, it's impossible to map completely.

Margrave Freche handed me a current version map on what he knew about the southern countries, with some of the main countries marked.

"This is the information that I've personally collected on the southern countries, but I've only shared it with Earl Ruktoferd and the Upper House of Lords so far..."

There were only four labeled countries. Jenhans, Nazric, Epadena, and Pactoshiki.

...Seven years ago, Kamil shared with me that he was from Pactoshiki, a country which is in the southwest. Jenhans is a country directly south of eastern Arxia, Epadena was the largest of the southern countries, and occupies the southeastern portion of the continent. Also, Nazric had no land of its own on the map.

"Recently at the end of this spring, Nazric lost a war with Epadena, and the country was subjugated. Using its momentum, Epadena's swallowed up several small countries around it and has been expanding rapidly."

Epadena's current leader seems to be a conqueror fixed on expanding by military might. It's said that as for the countries adjacent to Epadena, without caring about cultural differences or ethnicities, they've been conquering all their neighbors and incorporating their land into Epadena through force.

Since several small countries on Rindarl's southeast border have become their vassal states, does this mean that Epadena has been receiving aid from Rindarl? However, I need to make sure.

"However, isn't something of this degree common in the south?"

Otherwise, countries wouldn't come into existence and fall so quickly in the south.

Conflict is endless there, borders keep getting redrawn, countries expand or contract, or a new country becomes independent and causes more strife. I need to find proof that Rindarl was involved, either directly or indirectly.

“Indeed. But, something changed recently about Epadena’s strategy when invading other countries. ...Epadena had been fighting their war with Nazric for four years, at a stalemate.”

Four years. ...Four years, eh.

Claudia next to me whispered something to Bellway, and he got up. The two of them are some of the only literate people around me, and while they take care of a narrower range of responsibilities, they often deal with numbers. Maintaining our combat strength, daily operations and administration, the flow of money necessary for all this.

It takes a strong country to declare war. If you want to supply combat lines far away from your country, you need even more resources. For example, human resources for leading the army and its soldiers, logistics, a source of weapon production, other combat materials and food sources, and you also need a stockpile in the national treasury that can maintain the state of any newly conquered country and help in assimilating them in an orderly fashion.

For countries that are constantly in danger of invasion from one another, to the extent where the map is constantly changing, they shouldn’t have the ability to come up with such national strength.

“So, has Rindarl intervened?”

“Oh, you’re quite perceptive. Rindarl... or rather I should say, the Giograd Dukedom from Rindarl, they were trading weapons and resources to both Nazric and Epadena during the war. Perhaps I should say instead that Giograd was selling to both sides.”

So, due to the intense, long war, Giograd was able to make an enormous profit by selling weapons and resources to both sides.

“How was Epadena paying for all this?”

There’s still a huge gap between the economic strengths of Giograd and Epadena, to the extent where they couldn’t possibly be trading equally with each other. In fact,

Epadena's war with Nazric was at a stalemate for four years. Judging by Epadena's size on the map, it shouldn't be a country like Arxia that still has the strength to develop economically while remaining at war for so long.

So just what has Epadena been using to pay their debts? Just as I had a bad premonition, Margrave Freche smiled sardonically.

“...By the way, Lady Kaldia, I don’t think that you’re as bad of a person as rumors in the royal capital are making you out to be.”

“What?”

Just what is this sudden topic, I was completely surprised, while the margrave shook his head.

“Your strategy in that one battle doesn’t seem like it’s capable of being conceptualized unless you know what true evil is. Judging you to be overly cruel, that’s just the incompetent inland know-nothing nobles that have experienced nothing but peace for too long.”

“...Ignorance in nobles is unforgivable.”

“I know very well that they’ll cry just about anything. Anyhow, back to the main point. What Epadena is paying to Giograd, is humans.”

Humans... My premonition came true, and I couldn’t help looking away from Margrave Freche for a moment.

However, this makes it clear. Giograd’s objective for intervening in the south is slaves... in other words, they view the southern countries as a manpower resource.

Buying and selling humans, this is considered a great evil according to the teachings of the Ar Xia church, and it’s a serious crime in Arxia. As for my late father, after ruining the economy in Kaldia with his despotic laws, he sent the unemployed citizens to other domains as “laborers,” which he also used as a bribe to avoid paying national taxes.

Although he managed to make it look on paper like it was just for labor, in actuality it was no different from him being a slave merchant. For this and all his other crimes, I would have ended up executed along with him when they were discovered, if I had

never stopped him.

Epadena's basically doing what my father did. If they have nothing else to sell, sell humans.

"Right now in Rindarl, the place that requires manpower the most would be Densel..."

When I muttered that, Margrave Freche's gaze became even sharper as he looked at me, and his expression also contained pity.

But right now, I don't have the time to care about what his emotions are. I need to consider what will happen on our currently stalemated eastern border, if Giograd supplies Densel with their recently acquired slaves.

"...Is it something like that?"

Although it's in quite a roundabout manner, it seems that there's a connection between the southern countries' situation and our current eastern border defense problem.

Currently the royal army is in charge of the battle against Densel. ...Without any prior knowledge, I doubt that they'd be able to handle the inhumane tactic of using slave soldiers. The knights in the royal army care too much about chivalry, it's a weakness for them on the battlefield.

"Twenty days ago, an envoy from Pactoshiki came to the southern border of my domain for the first time in eleven years, and gave me detailed information about the southern countries' situation. Epadena is now in the process of conquering Jenhans. It seems that even in the countries that have allowed Epadena's military to pass through, quite a large number of people are disappearing."

"Pactoshiki... that's one of the few countries with permission to trade with Arxia. Considering that they even sent an envoy to inform us, does this mean that we have a friendly relationship with Pactoshiki?"

"That's correct. A little over ten years ago, an Arxian merchant group seems to have visited Pactoshiki, and contributed greatly to its economic development. They also helped spread the teachings of the Ar Xia church there, and although I don't know what will happen since Pactoshiki is so far away, Pactoshiki has also sent us an official

request for protection, as a fellow country that believes in the Ar Xia church."

It seems that Pactoshiki's main goal must be their official request, they must really view the development in the southern countries as dangerous if they're requesting our aid when we're so far away from them.

...A merchant group that visited Pactoshiki a little over ten years ago, this can only mean that the merchant who was executed for my crimes must have been among them. Meaning... Kamil's father.

CHAPTER 170

THE END RESULT OF FOUR YEARS

The nobles were already beginning to return home, and it was late at night with the moon high in the sky. In order to retrieve Ratoka, we left the party and headed for the back door. So that the door guard wouldn't notice us, our horse-drawn carriage was parked a little ways to the side of the road.

Bellway went back first. He needs to write letters on my behalf, to let some other places know about what Margrave Freche just told me.

At the time that we decided on beforehand, Ratoka came out. Seeing him, Claudia silently moved to the coachman's seat.

“...Thank you for your efforts, Elise. How was the result?”

“I was pretty lucky. I think you'll be satisfied with the information. ...Why are you glaring at me?”

Ratoka was beginning to sweat and his face was paling, while he pouted his lips in dissatisfaction. Why am I glaring, he's asking?

“You got lucky? Is that so. Didn't I tell you not to overdo things and put yourself at risk, you idiot!”

My voice came out much louder and angrier than I expected. However, I wasn't able to contain the hot emotion boiling in my stomach and get it under control.

Ratoka's left arm was completely swollen. He probably has a broken bone. While grinding my teeth, I used a thick fan as a substitute for a piece of wood, and wrapped some cloth around his arm in a makeshift splint.

“Who beat you, and why?”

If he had been able to acquire the intelligence successfully, he probably wouldn't have been beaten by the security for being a suspicious person.

In the first place, I had him infiltrate the archduke's family's servants. I knew that there was some risk involved. ...But the fact that Ratoka returned to me with a broken arm made my blood boil over.

Normally, my anger should be directed at the people that dared to hurt a citizen of my domain, but right now my anger was being directed irrationally at Ratoka.

But, I still know that being angry at Ratoka is unreasonable. So I desperately swallowed and pushed down my anger, until it was only a quiet whisper of rage.

"A, a male servant... Actually I shouldn't have been beaten. It's just that, there was a guy who was pestering the laundry woman that was my information source. So, in order to protect her, teehee."

What's with that teehee. Don't make it sound like your injury isn't a big deal. Ratoka's expression kept saying that it was nothing to him, and even though I just desperately pushed down my emotions, now irritation was welling up within me.

"Rather than such a thing, be happier. Although I got injured, what about the archduke family's situation? The laundry woman was a maid back in the day and knew about it. I was able to investigate properly for you. You want to know, right?"

"Such a thing, you say...?"

Even though his lips were so pale, he was still smiling, something feels off about his expression. And at the same time, I finally understood what emotion this was.

".....Got it. Report the information you obtained to me."

"Like I said, you don't need to be so angry. I even worked so hard for your sake."

Both of our voices were tense. The atmosphere was filled with irritation as Claudia drove the horse-drawn carriage.

"I'm not being angry now. I just said to give me a report. You may want to be praised, but unless you have results, your injury will have been in vain. Hurry up and tell me."

As expected, Ratoka deeply furrowed his eyebrows. Due to my irritation, what came out of my mouth sounded five times worse than what I intended, I realized this.

“Just what are you saying! What are you unsatisfied with!? Don’t joke with me!!”

“...That’s what I should be saying!! What am I unsatisfied with? You’re treating your own injuries too lightly!! You should be angrier, you should be in pain, you idiot! I said I wanted information on the archduke’s family, but rather than that, your body is more important!!”

“What!? I’m important!? That’s...”

“You are one of my citizens! Listen up, for a domain lord, their citizens are who they should protect first and foremost!! You got hurt carrying out such an unimportant task, and you’re treating it as trivial!? You’re the one who should stop joking around, don’t just debase your personal value as a citizen of Kaldia!!”

With the momentum of my anger exploding, I was ranting, and when I finished I noticed Ratoka’s eyes were wide open in astonishment and he was frozen solid. My head was cooling down now. Eh, just now, why was I so angry? Embarrassment, anger, confusion, and even masochism, all those emotions welled up within me, and I reflexively covered my mouth.

I couldn’t help but look, I noticed that Ratoka’s mouth was trembling.

“Y, you, did, did you really mean that...?”

“This is an order from your domain lord, forget everything you heard just now, get off the carriage, and run home.”

“Impossible.”

Now Ratoka’s shoulders were trembling as well. It feels like even a gust of wind could blow him over right now.

Indeed, for me to have said the things I just did, I feel like there’s so much to laugh at. I mean, it’s such a slip of my character for me to say the things I really wanted in a fit of anger.

But, I just couldn’t forgive Ratoka’s nonchalant attitude towards getting injured. And all the same, even if he returned without injuries, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if I wasn’t able to provide some security for him.

“...You, this is... This is what’s called trust – isn’t it?”

-I expected Ratoka to explode at me, but opposite from what I was prepared for, his voice sounded shaky and almost teary.

Huh? When I hurriedly looked directly at him, he was wiping tears from his smiling face with his uninjured arm’s sleeve.

“Sigh – it took so, so long... Later than me.... Honestly-”

“Y, you’re noisy. ...Shut up, Elise. Also, use neutral gender pronouns instead of male ones, to refer to yourself.”

With difficulty I managed to squeeze those words out, and all my emotions other than embarrassment had cleanly left me.

CHAPTER 171

HOW TO MANIPULATE AN ARGUMENT

Two days later, after a day of rest on an off day, I returned to noble school and greeted people around me as necessary, then I went to go greet Sieghart of my own volition for the first time.

“Good morning, Sieghart. It’s a pity that I didn’t see you at the party two nights ago.”

“Ahh, good morning, Kaldia. Well, actually... I didn’t go to the birthday party at the archduke’s residence.”

The general commander’s grandson sounded weaker than usual. When I looked at the center of the classroom, Eric and Grays, who had finally returned to class after such a long absence, were glaring angrily in Sieghart’s direction.

Ahh, I have to deal with this early in the morning. I really didn’t want things to become like this because of me, Sieghart and Eric should be getting along with each other originally.

“...I remember you said that you would participate, so what happened?”

“The morning on the day of the party, my grandfather heard about what happened at school, and ordered me to stay at home and not participate in order to learn self-discipline. No, I should say that self-discipline was only an excuse. As a warrior, I must follow up on anything I say to the very end.”

Oh? I see, it’s a boycott.

General Commander Rolentsor’s style is to never stand down and withdraw from anything that has been decided upon. And it’s evident to see from the Arxian royal army, that he has a firm hold over them and strictly upholds the code of chivalry.

The commotion that began from my win in the mock duel using tactics considered underhanded, has now become a direct confrontation between me and Sieghart on one side, versus Eric on the other side. In order to resolve this conflict, it depends on

if Eric can officially take back his insults to me in front of everyone, this has already become a matter of nobles' pride.

"I see, so that's what the general commander has done... Then, Sieghart, I have something I'd like to request of you and your grandfather."

"Request?"

"Yes. I'd like to resolve this situation. Definitely before it gets any bigger and the archduke hears about it."

"Wait a minute, the archduke? Just what exactly do you want me to do?"

"Nothing that major. I'd just like for you to write a formal request letter, on my behalf."

Sieghart furrowed his eyebrows even deeper, indicating that he didn't know what was going on.

"...Kaldia, what are you plotting?"

"What's with that? Plotting, you make me sound like I'm up to something nefarious..."

"My bad, your expression just now made me think that you had some evil scheme in mind, though."

Just what type of face was I making? I could have sworn that I didn't allow my facial muscles to even twitch. Being a bit unsatisfied with myself, I couldn't help but touch my cheek silently.

I had Sieghart write a letter of formal request for Baron Eric Teal Dovadain to visit the Jugfena royal domain, as the representative on behalf of the royal family, the archduke's family, and the House of Lords, in order to console the soldiers exhausted from the long, ongoing war.

The official request letter to Eric was filled with formal, stuffy, speech, but that was the essence of the letter. Sieghart's face kept twitching as he kept looking back and forth between the letter and me.

“K, Kaldia... are, are you serious about this?”

“Of course. I already received consent yesterday from Earl Einsbark who’s in charge at Fort Jugfena, as well as Ergnade who’s the leader of the Jugfena knights, in fact they think it’s an interesting plan and will help me with my goal.”

The grinning face of my adoptive father Ergnade appeared in my mind. Unlike for me, my plan had no benefits whatsoever for Ergnade and his brothers, they’re helping me mostly because they think it’s amusing.

“Eh, but, Fort Jugfena is on the frontlines, right? How are we going to get the archduke to agree to sending his son Eric, even if Eric is only the second son, to the frontlines when Eric’s not even a military officer...”

“No, Fort Jugfena isn’t on the frontlines, right now it’s just a military base supporting from the rear. Recently the House of Lords made a decision, and supplies are being stored there. There’s a simple hospital that’s been set up there, so it should be the perfect place for a consolation request.”

“Ah, I see... But, will Eric go there obediently?”

“He’ll go. ...I can’t say the details, but at any rate the Upper House of Lords will have to send a person with an appropriately high enough rank as a commander to the front lines before the next battle.”

Although I immediately shared the information I received from Margrave Freche with the eastern border, the army will be able to prepare for things in advance, but it can’t make a move.

There are three separate chains of command for the soldiers on the border currently. The first and largest group is the royal army commanded by Marquis Rolentsor. The second group consists of Earl Einsbark and his Jugfena knights and commoner soldiers stationed at Fort Jugfena. And, the third group are the border domain nobles’ armies, meaning Margrave Genas’ army and the Kaldia army.

The only group that’s allowed to move independently and attack without direct permission from the king, is the royal army. Of course, during war the other two groups have permission to respond to and deal with any Rindarl attacks, but in other words they aren’t allowed to decide attacks on their own. Basically, not all of our forces

are allowed to make decisions on their own to engage the Rindarl troops.

...The laws regarding warfare are somewhat complex in Arxia, this is because Arxia primarily adopts a defensive strategy, but in times of war, there are provisions that also allow it to invade other countries. However, permission is needed from the king in order to attack enemy troops or territory, and we're only permitted to invade countries that are currently attacking us. This type of law is in effect because Arxia views itself as a non-aggressive country, while leaving provisions in place to attack enemy countries if we are attacked first.

The Sacred Code which is the origin of Arxia's laws contained no mention of requiring the king's permission. However, in order to not get involved in war and worsen the relationship with the neighboring countries, the non-aggression laws were enacted.

...Currently, the enemy is about to use slave soldiers forcibly drafted from a defeated country. I expect that the morale of the largest group of our soldiers on the border, the royal army, will take a huge hit from this. In order to prevent this, even if only a little – the king, or at least someone related to the king coming to visit and console the soldiers, it's the most effective type of performance to boost their morale.

Considering the scale of the battle, actually it should have been someone even higher ranked like Grays or the crown prince.... But with the risks involved, the House of Lords was willing to compromise and send Eric instead, that's how I got my proposal passed through even the Upper House of Lords.

Besides, in the formal, stuffy speech words of the official request to the archduke's family, I hinted at knowing the archduke's family's secret problems. Remembering the information that Ratoka brought back to me on the archduke's family, I smiled to myself. Marquis Rolentsor hates scandals more than anything, and the archduke definitely wouldn't welcome a scandal either.

So of course, the archduke wouldn't interfere with sending Eric to console the soldiers, he was basically forced into having to send Eric.

Obviously, in order to console the soldiers and rally their morale, a speech must be prepared for Eric to give to the soldiers.

I'm already a person that's a part of noble society. I'll settle this problem using nobles' methods. ...I've manipulated Eric into a situation where he's going to be forced to

swallow his pride and the insults he said against the soldiers.

After Eric is dispatched to the border, I shall ask him to withdraw his previous remarks, and if he still doesn't, it'll become necessary for the archduke himself to resolve his own family's situation. And besides, with this it should relieve some of Eric's unresolved anger and maybe correct his personality issues, along with settling this entire problem.

I see, I can understand now how it may have seemed like I was plotting something. But I was just trying to do what I thought was best for the security of Arxia, how odd.

CHAPTER 172

TO FORT JUGFENA

I don't know the details of the exact procedures that went on in the Upper House of Lords for the approval, but it seems they agreed to dispatch Eric to Fort Jugfena without incident. Since time was short, the notice for Eric came immediately.

For some reason I was also included in the request to go to the frontlines, and so I requested a break from noble school. Even if the enemy slave soldiers are defeated or captured, what should be done with them if they're captured, should they be executed, it's highly likely that it'll cause Arxia's soldiers' morale to greatly decrease as Arxia doesn't have slavery. ...While I don't want our main forces consisting of the royal army to lose morale, I don't know how they'll handle things, but I want to personally manage any slave soldiers that my Kaldia army captures, in the future.

Maybe I'll decide that I have the know-how to handle foreigners since I've absorbed the Shiru tribe into my domain already, or maybe I'll decide to "dispose" of the slave soldiers and execute them immediately. Or, it could even be both.

After I submitted a leave of absence notice to the Upper House of Lords, I was informed that I would be given a special examination to test my academic knowledge upon my return. In some ways, this resembles my previous world surprisingly closely.

And so, I set out from the royal capital and headed for Fort Jugfena, together with Eric and Marquis Rolentsor, returning to the battlefield for the first time in half a year.

It took two days to arrive at Fort Jugfena by horse-drawn carriage. I suppose it should be only natural that we'd rest at Kaldia which was on the way, right?

For someone just recently promoted to an earl, to be visited by a member from the archduke's family along with a marquis, this would normally never happen. Therefore, there's only enough employees of at my Mansion of Golden Hills to maintain the place, there's not enough people there to deal with these high-ranking guests.

Bellway who was the current leader of the servants at the mansion, hurriedly hired some more people from the surrounding villages, and barely managed in time to make the arrangements to hospitably accommodate them.

“...This is unbefitting of my ranking, it’s such a small place.”

As always, the first words that Eric said were quite rude as he got off the horse-drawn carriage, but his tone didn’t sound like it was mocking anything, it sounded more reflexive.

“Its owner probably didn’t think that she would receive a noble title promotion, by the next time she returned.”

“Ah, right. Then again, no descendant of Kaldia would want to believe that any ancestor of theirs would gain accolades through winning with cowardly tactics, now would they?”

“Indeed, I have no idea what kind of children I will have, or if I will even ever have children. If I think that my children could be like the previous domain lord of Kaldia, I think that I’d never have children in that case.”

Of course, Eric’s not just referring to my father, he’s obviously talking about me as well. Just thinking about if my children would be able to kill people without flinching or batting an eye, it’s quite daunting to consider.

Even though I made such a remark, Eric still sharply shrugged his shoulders and glared at me. It seems that my statement was unintentionally grating on his nerves.

...Ahh. I see. It’s not strange for my self-deprecating comments to have touched Eric’s nerves. Since I learned from Ratoka that Eric killed his own mother, and is so distant from his stepmother.



For our departure on the following day, my soldiers of the Kaldia army were also making their preparations, as they were coming along as well. From here on I’m no longer going to go by horse-drawn carriage, I shall be leading them while riding Rashiok. In the past three years, with the successful integration of the Shiru warriors into my army, as well as an increasing number of villagers that have signed up for

military service, my army's undergone some expansion and I now lead them while riding Rashiok.

It's been a few months since I went off to noble school, but Rashiok seemed to be doing quite well. His snake-like tail kept wagging, and he was light on his feet as he rushed to me. He had an affectionate expression as I stroked his neck, and his ears were twitching as a sign of pleasure.

"I'm sorry that I haven't been able to see you lately. I would have liked to take you to the royal capital as well, but that would have been a little..."

Even though he couldn't communicate with me in my language, he desperately growled in return like he was trying to chat with me. Somehow it felt like I could understand what he meant, as I closed my eyes and continued stroking his neck.

"My lord, you're quite happy today for some reason, aren't you?"

"Mm?"

Just like the previous time we went to Fort Jugfena together, Paulo was leading my horse for me, as he chimed in with his peaceful tone of voice. Somehow, this all feels quite nostalgic. Paulo's gone through puberty since then and is much taller than last time, but it seems that his personality remained the same.

"Ahh, ...at any rate there's so many bothersome things in the royal capital. Although I can't exactly relax and take it easy back in Kaldia, I wanted to come back here as soon as possible after finishing noble school. Rashiok is here as well."

"It's not just Rashiok, we're here as well. Because whenever my lord isn't here, we wouldn't have the occasional fancy food, so we wanted you to come back soon. Ahh, I wish I was born two years later. Then I would have been young enough to attend to you in the royal capital together with Athrun, it's such a pity..."

"What, you miss me just because of food? I'd like to distribute more abundant varieties of food throughout Kaldia, though. I hope this war gets settled soon so I can spend more time on Kaldia."

"Please keep up the good work. But, remember not to push yourself too hard."

Paulo hummed through his nose while making all these oh so casual comments, and he chuckled. In a horse-drawn carriage a little bit apart from us, I could sense the painful gazes of Eric and Marquis Rolentsor on us.

CHAPTER 173

COME TO THINK OF IT, SPEAKING OF...

Even though summer was just about over, when we arrived in the Jugfena royal domain, it still felt like the peak of midsummer. With the Amon Nor mountains to the east, hot air gets trapped in eastern Arxia. So of course, Jugfena will have higher temperatures than the royal capital, and while Kaldia is also warmer than the royal capital, it's cooler than Jugfena due to the cold drafts that will sometimes blow down the Amon Nor mountains in Kaldia.

“Hey. Thanks for your hard efforts in escorting them here. The Fort Jugfena knight order and I shall take it from here. ...You had to come here earlier than I expected. I was hoping that you’d be able to enjoy your school life a little longer.”

Ergnade came out from the black iron fortress to welcome us. He probably has the position most suited for this task, as he’s the younger brother of the current Earl Einstark with Wiegraf having taken over the title.

“While the order did indeed come earlier than expected, there was no problem at all, as I’m always ready to move out at a moment’s notice. Ergnade, I thought you were on the frontlines...”

“No, I was called back here a while ago. There have been no movements recently on the frontlines, so things have been left to my subordinates, and I’m basically in command now of scouting and reconnaissance. I never would have imagined though that you’d learn about such major enemy movements from Rindarl, while in the royal capital.”

“Due to being away from the battlefield, perhaps it was easier for me to notice their roundabout actions. Besides, it was Margrave Freche that gave me this critical information.”

“Ohh, Freche, eh. It seems that your network of connections is spreading at an astounding rate. The Rolentsor family, the Terejia family, the Moltons and the Freches, and my Einstark family, the next one seems like it’ll be the archduke’s family.”

“It was just luck that we were in the same class. She’s just fortunate to have the opportunity to know so many people.”

Ergnade and I glanced over at Eric who was getting down from the horse-drawn carriage with a sullen expression on his face. He’s here primarily because he still wouldn’t withdraw his insults for the sake of his own name’s honor, so he’s in quite the bad mood. On top of that, he has to travel with me who he doesn’t like, so his mood was steadily worsening.

“I see, he’s the one.”

“Yes, he’s Baron Eric Teal Dovadain, representative of the Upper House of Lords.”

Although the Einsbark family is deeply involved with the royal family and the Upper House of Lords, Ergnade basically almost never goes to the royal capital. This is his first time meeting Eric.

“I guess I’ll guide him to my older brother. You should have your soldiers rest first. Just like always, we’ve left the second through fourth floors of the same southern building from before empty for your army. I’ll let you know when it’s time for dinner, so be ready.”

“Understood. I thank you from my heart, for caring about the well-being of my soldiers.”

“...I think that I wouldn’t mind though if you started responding ‘yes, father, thank you very much’ instead.”

Ergnade finished our conversation by making a joke and slapping me lightheartedly on my shoulder, but I just stared at him in silence. I remember the strange expression from the last time I tried calling him father.



Even before entering noble school, I was at Fort Jugfena, so I’m already familiar with the layout of this place and the location allotted for our usage. There was no argument over who would get what room, and everyone picked their own places, being used to this fortress already.

"Just like always, the fourth floor will be reserved for my lord, along with Claudia, Oscar, me, and Teo."

"Ahh, you've taken the trouble of ensuring things. Thank you, Gunther"

"Not at all... anyway, what should we do about Rashiok?"

"Eh...?"

I took a look at Rashiok who was resting in the empty space between the fort buildings and its wall, which was where I was taught how to wield the halberd so long ago by Ergnade, Rashiok looked comfortable there for some reason and didn't seem like he wanted to move. Because we're currently in a state of war, I can't expect other military troops to help manage my draconis, and as the person responsible for him, I should be the one taking care of him. Well, Rashiok had been fine on his own until I got called here to Fort Jugfena, but...

There was another draconis sitting there next to Rashiok. The other draconis was a bit smaller than Rashiok, has scales that were almost pure white, and its wings were a shade of vermillion. Well, since Rashiok seems to be larger than usual according to what's in the books, I suppose this one should be about average size?

From what I can tell, this draconis doesn't seem to be one of Rashiok's siblings. His siblings that were left here before at Fort Jugfena, should have similar colors to him, albeit with slightly different color tones on their wings.

"Ah... Well, aren't they just pairing up?"

Seeing me observe the two draconis, Gunther spoke up hesitantly.

"Pairing up...?"

"Probably. I don't have any evidence though."

Pairing up... Got it. Rashiok is already a mature draconis, it wouldn't be strange if he finds himself a mate.

I see, while thinking that, I looked away from the two draconis. When I think about how it could be his mate, I felt a little embarrassed to watch them any longer.

"Come to think of it, speaking of finding a girlfriend... Gunther, how about your end? Even Teo informed me earlier this spring that he'd gotten married."

When I mentioned what I just thought of to Gunther, he suddenly spat out his drink. ...Did I say something so strange to that extent?

He's already quite a bit past the suitable age for marriage, but well, considering the fact that he's working in the army, there's no helping it. But, something that can't be helped even more is that he'll soon be approaching the age where it'll be too late for him to get married.

I don't know his exact age, but he should be about 20 years older than me, roughly. So at an estimate, he's in his early 30s... I see... (*TL note: Cast of characters indicates that Gunther is exactly 20 years older than Eliza, so he's 33.*) Just as I was thinking that he's already at the age where I should be calling him uncle instead of viewing him as an older brother, Gunther glared at me, muttering "mind your own business, brat!"

"If you have someone in mind, please hurry up and notify me. I will help you get married as fast as possible."

"What!? You're annoying!"

Gunther definitely seems to care about this subject at least a little, and another thing just happened to come into my mind. As for Claudia, just how is she doing in that regard? Expecting to hear anything out of her on this topic will be utterly useless, but according to her family's wishes, she was intended to have found someone to marry in her early 20s, and she's now 23.

...When I return to Kaldia, I need to check on this situation as early as possible. As one of my most trusted retainers, her marriage is something that has to do with me as well, after all.

CHAPTER 174

GETTING STEPPED ON

When Ergnade called for me to come to the dining hall for higher-ranked personnel, Wiegraf was already waiting there for me, smiling and waving hello. Maybe it's because I have a closer relationship to the Einsbarks, I was called before Eric or Marquis Rolentsor.

"Eliza-dono. I'm glad to see you well."

"Greetings, how are you doing, Earl Einsbark?"

"Mm, I'm the same as always. It's good that there haven't been many injured soldiers lately. I'm also grateful to the Fort Jugfena knight order for helping bring my adopted niece here safely. Please, go ahead and enjoy this insignificant meal."

He waved at me and indicated my seat, which was right next to him. My adopted child relationship with Ergnade should extend only to the two of us, legally. What's with him, calling me his adopted niece. I've never even heard of such a term.

I think that my thoughts may have shown slightly in my facial expression, as Wiegraf tilted his head with a hm? expression.

"Don't make such a face, you should just give up and accept being called an adopted niece by my older brother."

As I sat on the chair, I casually avoided looking at him. Back when Ergnade first proposed that I become his adopted daughter, he made a comment that I wasn't sure if it was a joke or not, asking if his family had discussed adoption with me yet. Then afterwards, letters indeed arrived from Wiegraf and Volmar for additional adoption proceedings, causing my cheeks to twitch just thinking about it. That was still back when I had no military achievements yet, so I declined politely, saying that there would be no benefits for them, but...

"I already receive plenty of protection from Ergnade, any more than this is..."

"Indeed. In fact, perhaps in a few years Ergnade may be the one receiving your protection."

"...Surely you jest."

Although he's the third son, Ergnade is the direct descendant of the now Marquis Einsbark who's ruling over the northern domains given to him that was confiscated from the Nordsturms. On top of that, he's the leader of the Fort Jugfena knights, a powerful position. For an upstart like me to reverse the power balance between us in just a few years, it's inconceivable.

"Ahh, okay, that was a joke. However, your name is now known far and wide, so I'll be delighted if you contact me about adoption as well at any time. As long as it's before you officially become an adult, even a secondary adoption is okay. After all, it'll be too late if we wait another few years."

Wiegraf was chuckling much like his father would have. ...I think that those from the Einsbark family can't help it, they love joking around too much to the extent where they even joke about serious matters.



The atmosphere in the dining hall remained jovial, until Eric finally arrived. Apparently he must have been uncomfortable eating with people so closely connected to me, he only responded curtly to Wiegraf's welcome.

As I explained the situation at school between Eric, Sieghart, and me to the Einsbarks beforehand, Wiegraf and Ergnade were rather lukewarm in their attitudes toward Eric, but he didn't seem to notice. Well, it's better if he doesn't notice. There's nothing as troublesome as a child that's throwing a tantrum – I couldn't help but think back to what happened with Ratoka several years ago.

"...no time to relax. There's an immense enemy army of more than 100,000 soldiers, including at least 30,000 slave soldiers, that will soon be pressing up against our borders. That's why I went to the trouble of returning here to the border, at top speed."

Eric's irritation level seemed to reach its maximum, right as we had stopped making idle chatter and were discussing methods to deal with the enemy slave army. Just as I was giving them the bad news, I glanced over at Eric, wondering if I had left him alone

for too long.

“Wonderful. Knowing the exact severity of the danger you’re dealing with, is one of the most important things on the battlefield.”

Ergnade was grinning as he made such a comment. Since I had given him such bad news, I didn’t expect that he would praise me. Eric was now looking at Ergnade with a blank expression of amazement.

“However, the enemy soldiers haven’t arrived on our borders quite yet. According to our scout teams, it doesn’t seem like their reinforcements have already reached the frontlines. We use draconis that have excellent senses which can detect enemies from afar and read the wind. When the enemy’s troops amass and attack our border, we’ll be informed beforehand, so rest assured.”

“...Draconis.”

Was it the one I saw? Eric’s face seemed to be distorting into a sullen expression again. He looked at me for an instant, and he furrowed his eyebrows even deeper. Does he have something against Rashiok? Although, Rashiok was by my side during our entire trip here, so I don’t think Rashiok has ever done anything to him before.

Then, Eric suddenly changed his distorted expression into that of a smile as he spoke up.

“If the draconis is such a useful beast, wouldn’t you also like one for a personal bodyguard, eh, Marquis Rolentsor? I was thinking this on the way as well, but a draconis seems like a suitable beast for the future king to ride. If its sense of smell can detect people from so far away, it must also be able to detect poisons and metals. As such, don’t you think it would make an excellent gift for the royal family?”

I was speechless. I could sense the malice dripping from Eric’s words, this was a direct attack against me. Other than me, all the people here were closer to the “future king” than I am.

...I see. So, he wants to separate Rashiok from me? I could hear the sound of my teeth beginning to grind unconsciously.

CHAPTER 175

GAZE INTO THE ABYSS

“I see, indeed that may be the case.”

Marquis Rolentsor nodded. At seeing that the marquis obviously agreed with him, Eric shot me a triumphant look for an instant. I avoided his gaze, and looked at my spoon instead.

“Then, shall we make an agreement about the next baby draconis you receive here?”

“I believe that their breeding season is in spring. I don’t know when we’ll be fortunate enough to acquire another baby draconis, but I’ll make the arrangements.”

The next moment, Marquis Rolentsor and Wiegraf were making a gentleman’s agreement for a future baby draconis, while I could see Eric with a stupefied expression, as if he was saying “huh?”

Well, he wanted to separate Rashiok from me by any excuse, but unfortunately for him, a draconis never changes its master. There’s no records in history of what a draconis may do if it’s forcibly separated from its master, as it’s never been done before, considering the fact that draconis are both extremely rare and powerful.

“...If it’s to be a draconis for royalty, I think a silver-white one would have a better appearance. While silver-blue is also a rare color, silver-white stands out more and complements the royalty.”

I remembered the white draconis that was getting close to Rashiok earlier today, so of course Ergnade and Wiegraf must also know about that draconis, as they were grinning. It feels like they must intend to plan on using that draconis instead in a future breeding plan.

Whether or not one of Rashiok’s children will become a royal draconis is something I don’t know, after all, there were three of Rashiok’s siblings that were sent here to Fort Jugfena before, and two of them were female. Judging by the evidence that a wild draconis actually came here as well, due to the fortress being located at the feet of the

Amon Nor mountains, the draconis here will have a much easier time finding a breeding partner, than Rashiok who usually travels around with me.

Eric's face showed that his mood was even worse now due to things not going his way, and everyone else was also showing cold expressions. Well, that's just how things are. And when you think about it, a draconis with only one wing like Rashiok wouldn't make a suitable gift for the royal family. Besides, I'm not sure Rashiok would enjoy that type of atmosphere either, being with the royal family.

Apart from all that, even if it was allowed, it would only be the king or the crown prince that would receive a draconis, certainly not a second son from the archduke's family born from a concubine who was sent close to the frontlines without much resistance.

...Without letting others know, I sighed mentally. Although I didn't intend to denigrate Eric's status for the way he was born, I realize that it's a fact of life in this world that your parents determine your social status from the time you were born, and I feel like it's affected my way of thinking just a little.

If I had been born a commoner in this world, then I would just be a commoner. But I was born into a noble family like the Kaldias, and the blood of that unimaginably evil family runs in me.



Early next morning, before Eric's scheduled speech for the soldiers, Fort Jugfena was already on full alert and combat ready at a moment's notice. Before sunrise, enemy scout troops had been detected invading the border. Of course, Fort Jugfena didn't have the luxury of just letting them do as they liked without responding, so our soldiers went out and captured all the enemies.

"It seems that all the captured enemies have been branded with slave markings. Until we decide what to do with them, I'll leave them here, is that alright?"

"I can lend you our prison, that's fine."

"I see. Then, I shall borrow the key to the prison from you for the time being, and imprison them in the two-floor underground dungeon below the training grounds."

I had that conversation with Wiegraf earlier this morning, and I was now holding on

to a heavy key ring. While playing with the keys, causing a jangling sound, I took Gunther and Ratoka with me, to the underground dungeon where the slave soldiers were imprisoned.

If the enemy scouts have arrived, their main army will be attacking at any moment. Ergnade and Marquis Rolentsor have already taken some soldiers to our most frontline position. I wanted to confirm the status of the slave soldiers as soon as possible before it was decided what to do with them.

“Elise, Gunther, if you’re feeling uncomfortable, feel free to leave the dungeon immediately.”

After letting both of them know that they could leave if they wanted, I unlocked the heavy door and descended the steps down into the dungeon. I imagined a dungeon like the one underground in my Mansion of Golden Hills, but this one wasn’t in such bad taste. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all made of polished stone, although the air inside was a bit stuffy. The slave soldiers were locked together in a big jail cell in the back, and as we approached, some of them noticed and were looking at us.

...There’s no light of life in their eyes at all. I reflexively looked back at Ratoka behind me. Back when I was talking to him while he was in my jail cell, he had those same eyes.

“What?”

“Nothing...”

I turned my head back around, and began inspecting each of the captured slave soldiers one by one. They’re mostly silver-haired, tan-skinned children around my age, which are physical characteristics that you wouldn’t see in Arxia, they appear quite malnourished, and they were huddling close to each other with exhausted expressions. From among them, I noticed one who was observing me quite closely. Even when I looked directly at him, he didn’t try to avert his golden eyes, and I beckoned to him.

“You there, come out front.”

After calling him, I regretted making him come out front, because when he stood up and I could see him more clearly, he was dragging his thin body as he supported

himself with his hand along the wall. This slave soldier who seemed just a little bit older than me, was missing his right leg.

CHAPTER 176

LISTENING TO THE BOY'S CIRCUMSTANCES

“Ah...”

At almost the exact same time, Ratoka also noticed that the slave soldier boy was missing his right leg, and both of us exclaimed in unison.

...Come to think of it, this is the first time I've met someone who's missing an arm or a leg. I haven't been on the battlefield for long enough, so I haven't seen enough injured soldiers yet.

The slave soldiers would have already been inspected for weapons before locking them up in here, but they were just wearing ragged cloths that were unable to conceal anything. Consider how thin and weak they all appear, I doubt that our soldiers would treat them violently.

When they were captured, I heard that they put up almost no resistance, and I suppose that throwing an injured slave like this boy into a unit consisting of only young slave soldiers would be only natural. As I was thinking so, the boy who was now standing seemed to be in pain, standing up with great difficulty.

“Do you, want, something?”

His voice was listless and dry. While he had an accent, he was speaking in Arxian. I hid my surprise.

“How and where did you learn the Arxian language? I recall that Nazric never had any interactions with Arxia.”

I answered him in the Nazric language, and it was easy to tell that the boy was stunned. Although his expression didn't change much, his eyes indicated that my words stirred some emotions deep within him. For an injured slave soldier like him to be unreasonably forced to join a scout unit, it was evident that he was exhausted as would be natural, but I could also tell that he's the type to suppress his emotions. Meaning, he's the same type as me.

“.....”

He seemed lost for words, and desperately kept squinting his eyes. It would appear that he's carefully considering his words. This is something that isn't possible for ordinary commoners. Now then, just who is he? This boy.

“...I'm, probably not who you think I am. While Nazric indeed never had any direct contact with Arxia, it's actively traded before with other countries that in turn trade with Arxia. For us smaller southern countries, the development of the huge northern country of Arxia could influence our very fates. My country Nazric desperately studied knowledge about Arxia. This information was drilled into us. I learned Arxian in class as part of that knowledge...”

I nodded in response to the flood of information that suddenly came pouring out of this boy who seemed only slightly older than me. As I took a step closer, the boy seemed to shrink back in fear of me. I thought for a moment on what to do, then I mentally snorted at myself because I had already decided what I should do already. I will do it just because I want to, although it could be said that it wouldn't be very noble-like of me.

Fortunately, this time it was very clear to me just what I should do.

“Elise, go to Ergnade and report to him that I'm removing a prisoner from the dungeon. Gunther, please give him some of our provisions, and make sure he receives some food. Also, summon Oscar over to me.”

As I abruptly ended the conversation with the boy and gave brief, direct orders to my two subordinates behind me, I could tell that everyone here was looking at me with various feelings. In the captives' listless eyes, I could finally see another emotion.



Being surrounded by me, Oscar, Ratoka, and Claudia, the boy from earlier who may have been feeling pressured by all of us seemed to have calmed down after eating some food we gave to him, but when I asked him what his name was, he choked up again. He said earlier that he wasn't who I thought he was, meaning that he wasn't a noble or royalty after all, so why was it that he had so difficulty saying his own name? Seeing that I was furrowing my eyebrows, he hurriedly explained things to me.

From what he told me, Rindarl forbade their slaves to use their names, and called them by numbers instead. If someone was found calling others by their names or using their own name, they would be punished severely.

It's an inhumane slavery system. I thought back to my battle at Ritox Plateau late last year. Considering the fact that I impaled and burned Rindarl prisoners of war to death back there, should I really be lecturing Rindarl about what's inhumane?

"Well? In the end, what's your name supposed to be?"

Ratoka interrupted from behind, saying he couldn't believe such a ridiculous story, but I told the boy to ignore Ratoka, and with a bit of a bewildered expression, he answered that his name was Vanita.

"Ok then, Vanita. I think you understand that I need to find out some information from you, so first tell me what you have to say about Rindarl, and how it was that you came to be here."

"We... because I have some knowledge about Arxia, I was brought here. We were sufficient as scouts, and if we were captured and killed, I heard that it would lower Arxia's morale."

I also found out from Vanita that the scout unit consisted of slave children brought from various different places. And, everyone had some friends or relatives that were also enslaved, whose lives would be forfeit if a slave betrayed Rindarl. Before they departed, there was also a rumor spread around that a few of them were real Rindarl child soldiers infiltrating the slave unit, spying on them, so while the slave children were on their way to Arxia, none of them, including Vanita, had considered betraying Rindarl at that time.

"Before you departed, do you know where their main forces were located?"

"I don't know the direction because there were no landmarks... I was brought to a building that they constructed with stone walls, and given instructions there. Before then, everyone had been together, with their family members and friends that are now hostage. After that, we were blindfolded, put on horses, and we arrived at some forest, then we walked all the way towards this black iron fortress that we could see from the forest."

“What exactly was your group ordered to come here and find out?”

As scouts, they’re still far too young, and as far as I can tell, none of them have even received any military training. Well, there’s the possibility that a few of them have been trained as scouts before, but either way, they should have been given some specific mission, instead of being sent here aimlessly just to lower our morale.

Vanita took a good look at me. Then, with fear in his voice, he spoke up again.

“...Our job was to see if there was a black-haired, red-eyed child here. A demon that drinks people’s blood, we were supposed to find out if Earl Kaldia was currently at Fort Jugfena.”

His voice left quite a deep impression because he was clearly being serious, while Oscar, Ratoka, and Claudia suddenly looked at me.

-After thinking for a moment, I shook my head slightly. For the time being, let’s trust this boy’s words.

CHAPTER 177

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Rather than not trusting the information Vanita gave me about being a slave soldier, I didn't trust what he told me about himself. Not minding the fact that my room was now dark, I kept thinking back to what he told me.

Being chosen because he was a child who learned about Arxia before, it sounds like there's nothing wrong with his story. But, even with having received some education before, his story sounded too logical... that's just the feeling I got.

There was nothing extra or insufficient in his story, and it was quite coherent. Such skills in the art of conversation come only come with training, he must be a person who knows how to apply his knowledge.

Unfortunately, I know almost nothing about Nazric to begin with, but Vanita gave me a deep impression that he was more intelligent than he should be. I definitely need to confirm his story again from another child, but the problem is who to choose.

According to Vanita's story, the slave children were spying on each other, and that there was the possibility of real trained child soldiers from Rindarl mixed in with them.

So, I need to carefully consider just who to ask questions of next. ...But, I don't have the time to leisurely decide. Since we're now on active combat alert, and battle could begin at any moment, I have to command my Kaldia army, attend meetings with the other leaders, write reports on logistics and supplies, review information... in addition to that I have to pay attention to the actions of other nobles and the House of Lords, confirm and follow the royal capital's orders... it's almost enough to give me a headache, I have a mountain of work piled up.

"Um, hey."

While thinking about what to do next, I heard Ratoka as he entered my dark room with a lit candlestick. When I looked at him to encourage him to go on, he seemed a bit lost on what to say. It was a bit similar to Vanita's atmosphere from earlier today, but also

somewhat different. Either way, Ratoka was being hesitant.

“...Um. Is it alright if I go visit the underground dungeon?”

“You’d like to talk with the captives?”

I didn’t think that it had that much to do with him, but I could also understand why he cared.

“Ah, there was something, that caught my attention.”

I couldn’t help tilting my head at how vague he was being. Then, Ratoka spoke up again in a small voice.

“Ah, no, um. It’s fine if you didn’t notice anything.”

“...What was it that caught your attention?”

I must have missed what he noticed, so I briefly ordered him to tell me. I don’t know if it’s because we’ve known each other for so long, or if because Ratoka usually doesn’t talk about this sort of thing with me, I feel like he’s being far too roundabout and needs to get to the point.

“Um... I was wondering whether it would bother you if I talked to the prisoners. ...Sorry.”

I couldn’t help but be speechless at what finally came out of his mouth after much hesitation. His hesitation, plus the apology that he felt necessary to add at the end, told me what I needed to know.

...Ratoka has been immensely affected by my lack of trust towards others, and even now he’s being greatly influenced by me. As my body double, I share almost everything with him. Now I know that trust is a mutual relationship, accumulated over time, this is something that I’ve learned myself through experience.

Because of his silly outburst in the horse-drawn carriage a few days ago, I foolishly believed that would clear the air between us of any remaining ill feelings. But he seems to believe that I still don’t trust him completely. Something which has been ongoing for so many years, wouldn’t disappear so easily, I see now.

“-No, sorry. About that, I’m the one who should apologize.”

It felt like there was mud congeging my chest, as I chose my words as carefully as possible and said them directly, which finally caused Ratoka’s expression to become less tense.

“R, ridiculous. Because you and I aren’t of equal status, it’s only natural that I should apologize if you don’t believe in me, and that you should be doubtful of me. ...I know at least that much.”

Even while saying that we weren’t equals, as if I wasn’t there, Ratoka stole my cup of cold black tea from my hand and gulped it all down. Hmph, I almost wanted to snort and laugh out loud at his incongruous behavior.

“Okay, go ahead. In fact, I was just wanting to give someone the order to go observe the prisoners. I’ll leave it to you, Elise.”

“Understood, ‘my lord.’”

Ratoka exited the room, as he addressed me by the title my soldiers usually did, a title that he normally would never use for me.

CHAPTER 178

CONDOLENCES

In wartime, Arxia's army basically has only one overall strategy.

First, defend against the opponent's attacks. Second, wait for the enemy army to retreat, be defeated, or annihilated, then counterattack. Third, quickly achieve preset goals, such as occupying strategically important locations. It's quite a simple pattern, maintained by Arxia's huge standing army.

Well then, the enemy's scouts have invaded our border, so Egnade and Marquis Rolentsor already took some troops to the frontlines. However, the few soldiers that they took with them fall into pattern one, they're squads that are meant for defending this fortress. Fort Jugfena's main forces are still currently stationed here.

Before Marquis Rolentsor finishes giving orders on the frontlines and returns, Eric is supposed to give a speech to the troops stationed here on behalf of the Upper House of Lords, and – he has several other tasks he needs to accomplish.

“Just what is it, you say I have work to do.”

When I informed Eric who leisurely came to my room like he had all the time in the world that he had work to do, he made an expression that indicated he felt it was bothersome. Since he's asking what he has to do though, instead of outright refusing, it seems at least he hasn't forgotten what he came here to do.

“Consolations. There's a makeshift hospital that's been set up at this fortress to accommodate injured soldiers. For the royal army themselves, I've heard that it's Marquis Rolentsor who's personally consoling the troops on the frontlines, and he outranks even the archduke on military matters.”

“Mmm... Hey, why do you know? You have nothing to do with the royal army, right?”

“No, because I've established a personal knight order, I have the position of an informal military officer in the royal army.”

The owner of a knight order isn't included as one of the members. However, the owner will be registered in name only as a military officer in the royal army. This system is in place to remind us that personal knight orders belong to the country first and foremost, before belonging to any individual. It's only a nominal job title, and doesn't even come with a salary like a normal military rank would.

...Although it's supposed to be in name only, because of it I'm now basically being treated as Eric's babysitter, and from time to time I'm also treated as a military officer similar to Ergnade and the others. While I'm also rewarded for my achievements, there's something I still don't understand. I had no intention of becoming a full-fledged military officer, so why was it that somehow people were treating me as one, without me realizing it?

Well, I also know that Ergnade is rewarded handsomely for his achievements in combat, so I can somewhat understand. And for the Kaldia domain that's certainly no economic powerhouse, reward money is always welcome.

According to Arxian military law, informal military officers are basically treated like outsourced jobs. And since there's no concept of outsourcing fees here, reward money isn't paid by the military budget, but treated as a private expense instead.

"This is an order from Earl Einsbark, that Baron Dovadain should finish meeting with and consoling the soldiers here before General Commander Rolentsor returns."

"...Ah, got it. I'll go."

Was he getting too bored these past few days, he listened to me easier than I expected.



The makeshift hospital where Eric was to do his consolations, was just a simple extension of the medical office in the fort. Even so, it was also a place where many seriously injured soldiers had returned to from the frontlines, as Fort Jugfena was currently in the rear of the frontlines.

"Urk...!"

Eric entered the nursing area with an unwilling, frowning expression, but the moment he stepped into the room, he caught his breath.

Soldiers were all over the room – no, perhaps I should say former soldiers. Many of them were missing an arm or a leg, or badly burned, it was clear to see that they were in excruciating pain.

“Eric-sama, there’s no need to hesitate, please go and console each of them individually and ask how they are doing. None of the patients in this room will be able to fight on the battlefield anymore, and now they’re just waiting to be picked up by their own domains and families.”

The doctor informed Eric about the soldiers here, but Eric seemed frightened, as he backed away from the patients’ beds.

“...Urgh,

The doctor and I shook our heads slightly at Eric’s reaction. While I had expected he would be shocked, it seems that the soldiers in this room were still too much for him.

There are no lightly injured soldiers in this hospital. In the first place, the lightly injured wouldn’t need to return from the frontlines. The only ones here were those that were seriously injured, to the point where they wouldn’t be able to move or fight. Although I explained the situation here to Eric beforehand, because Eric lives a daily life with no bloodshed whatsoever, he has no way of comprehending the sight before him, even though he has knowledge about it.

If it had been the crown prince or Grays here however, I doubt either of them would have been as shaken as Eric. They should have received an education to expect such things.

Now then, how will Eric go about consoling these soldiers? My job was just to bring him here, and in the end, I’m not connected to the royal army soldiers like he is, so I can’t replace him to console these soldiers on his behalf. Besides, that would completely destroy Eric’s image.

...How annoying. Why is it that I have to do something like educate a boy that’s my age? Well, it was my idea in the first place to give him a taste of the real world out there to help him mature, so I guess it can’t be helped.

CHAPTER 179

TRAUMATIC

Well then, it happened just as I was mentally sighing about Eric..

“Eeeee!! Why, why is the vampire here!? Nooooooo!! I don’t want to die, I don’t want to dieeee!!”

Suddenly, a crazed shouting arose from the corner of the nursing room. I clicked my tongue at being called a vampire, while the doctor headed over to see what was going on. Eric was frozen in shock for a moment with his shoulders trembling, then he looked around the room aimlessly.

“Please calm down, don’t get excited! Someone! Sedatives!”

“No! No!! There’s so many, I don’t want to be the vampire’s bait anymore!!”

“Why is the vampire back here!? I thought the vampire was currently at noble school!!”

“I can’t even fight anymore! Stop it, I don’t want to kill anymore or die!! I can’t even fight anymore, I’m even missing a leg now!!”

With the first scream getting everyone’s attention, subsequent screams arose all at once, and the room suddenly was awash in commotion. I detected many eyes on me, containing clearly negative emotions such as condemnation, contempt, and fear. The doctor hurriedly ushered me out of the nursing room, and like he was attached to me, Eric came following after.

When I closed the door to the adjacent room in an attempt to block out the sound, I finally let go of a heavy sigh.

Among the royal army’s soldiers, my infamous reputation is commonly known. They seem to be strongly emotionally opposed to me due to my methods of attacking enemy units and dealing with enemy prisoners, which runs directly contrary to their ideals of chivalry and benevolence.

I hadn't taken into consideration that my appearance would cause them mental trauma... even through the closed metal door, I could still hear the doctors and soldiers dealing with the panic that my appearance caused, and I unconsciously chewed my lower lip.

For them, I'm a symbol of death, violence, and the battlefield. As the hubbub continued in the distance, my emotions felt like they were condensing into something leaden.

"Baron Dovadain, my apologies. It seems that the place where you were to give your condolences has become chaotic. I shall let Earl Wiegraf Einsbark know that I'll have some other person take you here again on another day, so you can return to your room now."

Eric seemed unable to comprehend the situation at all, he just kept staring with a frozen expression on his face at the closed door leading to the nursing room as I talked to him. He finally looked at me when I finished speaking, with an expression of utter confusion.

"T, that just now... what was that about? Why is it that, our own country's soldiers fear you so much?"

"...The battlefield is a place that easily damages people's hearts."

While urging Eric to walk out of here with me, I decided to answer him. I had thought that it was necessary to educate him anyway, so I suppose this could be a good opportunity. When he visits here again to give his condolences, it'll be better if he's able to handle it better and come up with some words to say.

"For enemies on the battlefield, it means that you're fighting each other and trying to kill each other, which can create a sense of denial and mental suffering in humans. And as Eric-dono already knows, I've already killed many enemies mercilessly, even prisoners. The injuries those soldiers from earlier received caused them to have weak hearts because they don't ever want to return to the battlefield again. So, without being able to distinguish between allies and enemies, anything that reminds them of the battlefield causes them to be terrified."

"Damaged hearts..."

"Injuries and death don't only happen to your body, it can also happen to spirits. For

example, it's incredibly common for a person to have a phobia of fire if they were burned before, and all living creatures fear pain that they understand the cause behind. In order to keep living, in order to not die, they fear getting injured."

While giving a basic explanation of psychological damage to Eric, I also thought about my own citizens. The hellish life that they had under my late father's rule, scarred their hearts deeper than anyone. Although it was necessary, what followed after with my and Earl Terejia's rule amounted to what was essentially shock therapy. I felt a sense of regret that I wasn't able to take better care of their hearts.

".....You."

From behind me, Eric said only one word, with nothing else to go on, not even a question.

"Me?"

I had no idea what he was trying to say, and I tilted my head as I asked him back. Eric himself seemed unsure what to ask me, he was furrowing his eyebrows deeply.

"...You, um, well, didn't personally kill those enemy soldiers, did you?"

He finally ended up asking me a question in quite a roundabout manner. Even though the royal army also consists of commoners, their pride wouldn't even let them consider a tactic like the one I used before. Since they're not even in the same chain of command as me, they've never even participated directly in battle together with the infamously villainous me.

".....Are you really fine? Acting like nothing happened, even with something like that,"

He trailed off with a whimper as I glared at him. While his words were cut off, I perfectly understood what he was trying to say.

"They simply weren't my citizens."

I shrugged as I answered him. I didn't mention if I was fine or not.

I could sort of say that I was fine, but it's also partially true that I wasn't. Right now my feelings are sleeping deep within me, and unlike my citizens, maybe they'll come

up floating to the surface again at a time that I can't control.

【 PART IV 】

CHAPTER 180

SHORT-TUBED FIRE ARROWS (GUNS)

To the east of the Jugfena Great Plains, is a flatlands littered with small hills that look like floating islands from a distance, and castles are built as defense bases in those hills. Rindarl's army has abandoned these bases after suffering some defeats, and we've been occupying them as our most frontline position, for just over eight months. Currently, autumn is almost upon us.

Marquis Rolentsor left the defense of those bases up to Egnade and the Fort Jugfena troops he took with them, while he returned to the fortress with the royal army soldiers that had been guarding the bases up until now. There's the fact that we can't just leave our most frontline position unguarded, but right now Eric won't be any use in encouraging the soldiers, and it may be a bad idea to have the royal army soldiers continue with that task with their morale decreasing after such a long time stationed there.

"The costs to maintain our frontlines are getting ridiculous. If it increases any further, we might as well just annex all of Densel and make it into our vassal state."

When Marquis Rolentsor returned from the frontlines, he was complaining in dissatisfaction. The irritation from not knowing what Rindarl is thinking and being in a continuous state of war must be adding to his fatigue from having to have a meeting with us right after returning.

It seems that with the considerable time of eight months having passed, the royal army soldiers at the bases added many modifications and paths in order to make life more convenient there. They've put enough investment into it to where it would be almost impossible to accept returning those bases to Rindarl in any sort of border and peace agreement with them. It would be a sad story, having to develop the enemy country's infrastructure for them and then giving it back. That's why, even though it wasn't Arxia's original intention, it might end up having to expand.

"The economic benefits from researching the new weapons we captured should more than make up for our expenditures."

"That's just the thinking of a military officer without any citizens, Wiegref. Even if we increase the number of new weapons, that doesn't increase the amount of food. Since they can't see the war for themselves, the interior nobles won't agree to increasing our funding."

I touched the metal tube in front of me that was approximately four feet long. It's a gun. These were discovered abandoned in the bases that we captured.

These guns are quite different from the weapons I captured in the battle where I got promoted to an earl as a result. The guns my army captured before were six feet long thin metal cylinders with what looked like ladders attached, but these have a much closer resemblance to the guns I remember. The enemy's succeeded in significantly decreasing the gun's size, and I had the chilling thought that it was now much easier to maneuver.

"Well, we don't have the right to talk about what's in Arxia's national interest, so we'll have to leave these negotiations to the general commander.Anyhow, compared to the last battle we fought at the Great Plains, they seem to have made additional improvements to this new weapon of theirs."

The last battle, for me would be when I was defending Ritox Plateau. The enemy soldiers there only had conventional weapons, but it seems that guns made a reappearance on the Great Plains during that time.

"...They seem to use these stones."

A white stone cut into a hexagonal pillar shape was attached to the side of the tube, also reaching inside the cylinder. The mechanism seems to have some sort of function similar to a gun trigger, and when you remove its clasp, the stone will vigorously retract inside.

"Mm. It seems to be a device to trigger sparks for gunpowder. It's very similar to luminescent lamps made from fire moth powder..."

"Fire moth powder lamps can only produce light, nothing else. It doesn't have the ability to start fires."

Wiegref's comment caused both me and the general commander to shake our heads again.

“This is probably why we were able to capture a stockpile of these so easily. It’s likely that this mechanism is quite efficient already, but we aren’t able to make use of it because we don’t understand the principles.”

“In other words, we won’t be able to make use of this short-tubed fire arrow unless we build another mechanism for it to prevent fires. Although, speaking of mechanisms. We could use the other bigger version of this for reference.”

Apparently, it seems that Arxia is now calling this weapon short-tubed fire arrows, although I know it as a type of gun. It seems that several hundred years ago, there existed a simple cannon-like weapon that shot out large stones and other similar ammunition, which was simply called the “big tube” back then, which is where guns got this type of name from.

Now, the technology on how to make the cannon has been lost, and I think that most people probably forgot about its existence, until the appearance of these short-tubed fire arrows.

“Well, we have no choice now but to research it.”

“I concur, Earl Kaldia. This could be a wonderful weapon, depending on how we use it. I want to spread it to the royal army as fast as possible.”

I averted my gaze from Marquis Rolentsor who said that with sparkles in his eyes. It must be his personal interest, as a military person from the family obsessed with all things related to martial arts, weapons, and combat strategies.

“More importantly, the most critical thing now is getting permission from Baron Dovadain.”

While his primary purpose here is to give inspiration and encouragement to the soldiers in a formal speech, he’s also the representative of the king and can authorize us to take the initiative and do battle. Although I called it something formal, it isn’t really something all that pompous.

However, the problem lies with Eric.

CHAPTER 181

ERIC'S RIGHTEOUSNESS

Today I took Eric to the makeshift hospital again, and I waited outside the door for him as I read Ratoka's report on the prisoners.

Just like Vanita told me, the slave children seemed to be suspicious of each other. There were some children that were so afraid of being ratted on by a spy, causing their friends and family to be executed, that they even committed suicide in our dungeon, their mental states were quite fragile.

Given this situation, I suppose it's highly likely there are child soldiers among them that are deceiving us. My memories of Kamil further increased my suspicions. It's definitely possible that there are children just like him, that are capable of killing so many adults.

"-Kaldia."

Eric came out of the makeshift hospital and called out to me, so I put the report down.

"Baron Dovadain. For being able to come visit and console the soldiers again today, I thank you on behalf of my adopted father."

As I stood up and thanked him, Eric's face distorted. Still, maybe he was thinking that it would be a bad idea if those inside the hospital heard my voice, he indicated with a chin movement that we should walk further down the hallway.

"It doesn't matter how many times you ask me, I won't use my status as a royal to authorize an attack on Rindarl. When I return to the royal capital, I'm going to inform His Majesty the king and my father that we should offer a ceasefire and make peace with Rindarl."

"-Please consider it again. Without Baron Dovadain's permission, the Arxian royal army won't be able to efficiently deal with the enemy's slave armies. If the enemy uses their slaves as meat shields to attack us, then our army will..."

“Stop repeating yourself, it’s annoying. My answer is the same, we should retreat. Our frontlines should be pulled back to Fort Jugfena, no matter who our enemies are, we shouldn’t invade their territory, don’t you think?”

In the past few days, Eric and I have been repeating the same conversation over and over again. -This, is the new “problem” with Eric I was referring to.

“It’s contrary to our church’s teachings, using violence to forcibly take land and resources. But, just look at what’s happening at our frontlines. Not only have you guys forced the opponent’s armies back, you’ve also occupied Densel and Planates’ land, and now they want to defend their territory and take it back. And think about the toll it’s taking on our soldiers!”

Eric was angrily motioning about as if he wanted to hit something. It’s somewhat different from when he was throwing tantrums at noble school, this was because of his self-righteousness.

His face was changing color with how furious he was for the sake of others, and the slight self-loathing and self-denial that I could sense in him before was completely absent.

...The impact from meeting those soldiers that were so psychologically damaged, was much stronger than I expected. I knew that he would be sensitive towards mental trauma, but I never would have thought that he’d make the leap from seeing injured soldiers straight to denying the fact that we were at war.

“Baron Dovadain, you should understand that it will be difficult to relinquish those captured bases as it would hinder peace negotiations.”

“Humph, what are you saying. You’re the one who should understand, right? Such a thing isn’t necessary for peace negotiations. Isn’t Rindar’s request simply to treat the first prince better?”

“.....”

That’s something that everyone in this war knows. I was speechless in response.

“Summon First Prince Albert back from the monastery to the royal palace, and allow him to attend noble school. Cancel Prince Alfred’s crown prince position, and the

cause of this entire war will disappear. For such a meaningless reason, sacrificing our citizens in a ridiculous conflict... Hey!?"

Before Eric was able to continue his rant any further in the hallway, I suddenly dragged him into an adjacent room. Even if he's a high-ranking noble like the archduke's son, there are words that can't be said. What he just said was a clear insult to the Upper House of Lords – the highest decision-making body in Arxia. Although he's from the archduke's family, he's still only the second-born son of a concubine, there are statements that can't be taken back once they're said out loud.

"What are you... doing!"

"Calm down a little. Calling the decision of His Majesty the king 'meaningless and ridiculous' in such a public location, you know what will happen if this is heard, don't you?"

I closed the door and covered his mouth, while coldly urging him in a whisper to remain calm, and reminded him that he was disrespecting the king. I forcibly made him focus on me, instead of the injured soldiers. Hopefully with this, his head will cool down somewhat and he'll regain his senses.

Eric stared at me as I talked, then he slowly nodded. The moment I took my hand off him, he quickly scampered away from me, putting distance between us.

"My apologies for being rough with you."

"No..... It's fine. I think I was... a bit carried away just now."

Eric's face was pale as he sat down on a nearby chair while breathing hard. He felt like a balloon that just lost its air, it's like a hole just opened up in his emotions, and he lost his original shape.

CHAPTER 182

REALIZING THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF RANK AND DUTY

After I saw that Eric had calmed down somewhat, I pulled over a chair and sat down as well. Time is urgent, and this was a good chance. I have to be able to convince Eric either today or tomorrow.

“I understand perfectly well, Baron Dovadain’s concerns. The things that you’ve said, everyone’s considered them, including me.”

“Then!”

“However, what you’re saying is wrong. Since you’re from Archduke Dovadain’s family, you should be looking at the situation as a politician, not a knight.”

I used a rather forceful tone of voice with Eric, and while he looked surprised for an instant, his face soon stiffened again as he bit his lip.

I want to sigh. From his reaction, I know what he’s thinking even if he doesn’t say it out loud.

“.....Kaldia, you must have known all this already. That’s why you brought me here.”

I didn’t say anything in response to Eric’s question. I didn’t know how Eric would react, after he met the injured soldiers again this time.

In the first place, I already achieved half my goal of resolving the conflict at noble school, when I succeeded in bringing Eric to Fort Jugfena. Eric will forced to officially retract his previous statement by me.

In order for him to give condolences to the soldiers successfully, I had hoped that seeing the actual state of injured soldiers would galvanize him, and that he’d be able to gain some passion as he encouraged the soldiers.

While passion was indeed injected into him, it went in the opposite direction I expected – while being a politician, he also took a knight's viewpoint, meaning he's on the ordinary soldiers' side. While being compassionate about the citizens, he's not considering the benefits from Arxia's standpoint, and he doesn't even know the determination of the soldiers that are willing to stand on the battlefield, so that's why he'll only be able to say words without much substance behind them.

"Even if you're wrong, you're not someone who will stand on the battlefield, and you weren't born as someone who will become a knight. It's a mistake for you to think about the battlefield from the viewpoint of a knight."

For those standing on the battlefield, they must be prepared for the loss of their lives or their friends' lives. Politicians must realize their own positions as well. They must be prepared to defend their citizens' lives as well as their own, and have the resolution to use others' lives for that purpose.

I'm someone from both of those worlds, and unlike Eric, I'm flexible and can adapt to both a military officer and a politician's roles. I continued lecturing him.

"...Death is scary to soldiers. So only those who are prepared to die can stand on the battlefield. Those whose hearts are broken, will retreat from battle. For the remaining soldiers whose hearts haven't been broken, it's considered an insult to run away from the battlefield. Baron Dovadain, after coming here, will you still insist on insulting those whose life is represented by their swords? Then will you escape back to the royal capital, and will you be able to show your face in front of Sieghart?"

If Eric returns to the royal capital just like this, as I explained to Eric earlier, I'm certain that Arxia's army will be unable to do anything to the Rindarl army that will use its slaves as a meat shield, and they would be forced to retreat from Fort Jugfena.

That would mean letting go of all our previous victories. No matter how you look at it, it would be a clear loss for us. ...And General Commander Marquis Rolentsor's name and honor will bite the dust.

When I mentioned Sieghart's name, Eric's expression became clearly distorted. He seemed almost about to cry, quite a childish reaction.

-Well, from what I remember of my past life, thirteen should be considered quite young. And, I'm the same age as him. But in the common sense of this world, thirteen

means you're almost an adult. They're treated almost equal to adults.

That's why, even though I realized that he wasn't mature enough yet to handle things, I was different from him as I was a reincarnator.

“You should know your own role.”

...If I try to think like a child, I feel like I can also sort of understand Eric. When I think about how he has no female role model in his life to look up to anymore, he seems pitiful, but just because I sympathize with him doesn't mean I'm going to be friends with him.

“You need to have at least a minimum amount of resolution, to be prepared before having come here.”

In this situation where it's only the two of us in this room, it's ridiculous to even try and conceal my feelings. I threw out those words forcefully at him.

While Eric's expression remained distorted like he was about to cry, he didn't remove his gaze from me until the very end. I think that this might be the first time we've held each other's gazes for so long.

“...Ahh, I got it. Just now, ...and the thing with Sieg as well, it was my bad.”

Nevertheless, in the end he was honest with his feelings for once, and then he hung his head.



As I was taking the despondent Eric back to his room, Paulo found me in the hallway.

“Eliza-sama, Earl Einsbark is calling for you.”

“Immediately?”

“Yes. He told me to inform Baron Dovadain as well. Our scouts have reported that Densel's forces have moved out from their capital, and orders are for our royal army to return to the frontlines immediately...”

“Got it,” I nodded, as I glanced sideways at Eric who was still looking down. He seemed to notice me observing him, and for a moment he turned around and looked back in the direction of the makeshift hospital, but he nodded affirmatively.

CHAPTER 183

ERGNADE'S RIDICULE

When I took Eric to the conference room, Wiegraf and General Commander Rolentsor welcomed him as if nothing had ever happened between them, and began making preparations for the formal declaration of attack.

Since bringing up the fact that Eric had refused to grant permission to attack before would benefit no one, and only us here know about it with me being the messenger between them and Eric, it's treated as an open secret.

In any case, this troublesome problem has finally been resolved. As for the preparations for the formal declaration of attack, it's not anything that I need to be involved in. I just have to wait for my next orders.

In order to use our time more efficiently on other work and various matters, Ergnade and I left the conference room first since there was no meaning to us being there at the current time.



“You still care about that in the end?”

“...So disrespectful, as expected.”

“Who might you be referring to, I wonder?”

On our way to the training grounds, Ergnade laughed coolly as he walked next to me. I felt rather annoyed at his expression that said he wouldn't give up on this topic, and I sighed.

“I wouldn't mind if you stuck a little closer to me, though. I wager I would have won the bet if that was the case.”

“Could you stop playing games about betting on people?”

“If I remember to, let’s do that next time.”

Well, what he was betting on was most likely whether or not Eric would give in to me in the end. The players in their betting game were Ergnade, Wiegraf, and Marquis Rolentsor. Given their personalities and understanding of me, I believe that Wiegraf most likely won their bet. He used to be the strategist for Fort Jugfena, and he has a sharp mind.

“Because Eric’s attitude didn’t soften at all after coming here, I thought that he wouldn’t be able to change. You were probably also able to cancel out his bad attitude towards you because of his loss of status, right?”

“Well, it’s developed into a factional struggle, to the point where one faction completely overpowered the other.”

Ergnade means that Eric having come here also affected his standing with the crown prince. To put it simply, he lost favor.

I want to have an appropriate political distance from the crown prince and Grays, as they will probably become the next king and archduke, and it seems that the general commander’s grandson wants to make friends and hang out with me, as long as it doesn’t cause me to get too close to the crown prince, I’m fine with that. In that regard, Eric whose status is sort of low despite his noble rank is just perfect for acting as a barrier between us.

Eric, who is the son of a concubine, started an entire factional struggle at noble school over a personal feud because of my mock duel with Sieghart, and in the end the royal army’s highest-level commander Marquis Rolentsor and Archduke Dovadain both learned about it and had to take action.

This was clearly a black mark against Eric. Of course his social status and power would be greatly diminished.

“Well, I found it unexpected that he would abandon his rigid way of thinking and change. I thought that you wouldn’t be able to break him, and that we’d have to enter battle without the ability to attack as we wished.”

I knew that full well. As a last resort, even if it caused the royal army’s morale to drop dreadfully low, I planned to have the Kaldia army and the Fort Jugfena troops slaughter

the enemy's slave soldiers acting as meat shields that the royal army wouldn't be able to deal with. If it became necessary, I was also prepared to request reinforcements from Margrave Genas.

"I wasn't about to allow him to continue thinking the way he did."

"Well, that's just how it turned out. But, even though it wasn't necessary, why did you make the effort to fix your relationship with him?"

I formed my mouth into the \wedge shape. He suddenly changed topics to this one, was this something he planned on asking all along?

"...I mean, I cared because I found it nostalgic, it..."

Just as I sighed deeply, Ergnade exploded into laughter. While he was laughing heartily, I glared at him with my eyelids half shut. That's why I hated the idea of saying it out loud. I thought about summoning Rashiok and having him toy with Ergnade, to get back at Ergnade for this.

That's when it happened.

From in the distance, we heard a low booming sound, together with the impact of the ground shaking. Ergnade and I both froze, and looked at each other.

"...That was from underground."

"The captured children...!"

"I'll go there first. You should call Rashiok to come with you."

I nodded, as Ergnade ran off first while adjusting his black uniform. I'm going to go straight after him as well, but first, I went out of the hallway, and blew a high-pitched sound with my fingers in order to summon Rashiok.

CHAPTER 184

A BAD PREMONITION

Rashiok came running over to me immediately. Then, I wondered if there was something wrong with my eyesight.

Behind him, the pure white draconis was gliding beautifully as it descended. The light of intelligence was shining from its eyes, and she sat down next to Rashiok, as she stared at me. It seemed like she was awaiting my orders.

I thought that a wild draconis would be unused to human beings. While I was confused, as if to reassure me, Rashiok made a gentle bark that sounded like he was saying it was alright.

Could it be that, the white female draconis treated me as the draconis leader? Even though I was confused, I nodded, and gave orders to both of them.

“Rashiok, first take me to Ratoka immediately. And... um, you, I would like for you to watch whether children are coming out around the fortress, could you do that for me?”

Even though I know that draconis are highly intelligent, will a wild draconis understand my words, I wonder. Just as I was thinking so, it seemed that she indeed didn't understand what I meant. However, Rashiok made some snorting sounds through his nose, in some type of communication with her, and she made a bark that sounded like an acknowledgment before flying up into the air.

“...You've obtained quite a nice girlfriend.”

Watching this scene in stunned amazement, I couldn't help but make that comment to Rashiok. He made a head movement that seemed like he was saying “I know, right?”



“Ratoka!”

“...Eliza?”

Ratoka was on the path beside the underground dungeon. Rather than saying on the path, maybe I should say instead that he was buried in the stone rubble, from the collapsed walls.

While each individual stone probably wasn't all that heavy, it seemed his clothes were being restrained by so many rocks, that he wasn't able to move and climb out.

"Are you alright?"

"Ahh, luckily my head wasn't injured at all."

I jumped down from Rashiok, and randomly started clearing the stones off and freed him from the debris. I could see bruises on his wrists. While he said that his head wasn't injured, it's highly likely that his body is black and blue from the impact.

"What happened?"

As I asked him, Ratoka shook his head in response.

"I don't really know what happened. Just as usual, I was about to go check on the state of the prisoners and was heading to the dungeon, when suddenly there was a huge boom and the ground started shaking, so I reflexively crouched down on the floor and that's when the walls collapsed. However, I heard the sound of the children. They escaped from the dungeon. It seems that they're being threatened by someone, so they took action."

A prison escape. ...What's more, he says they're being threatened. I knew full well that I was currently furrowing my eyebrows deeply. Even though I finally managed to resolve the problem with Eric, now I have something even bigger to worry about.

"By someone threatening them, are you talking about an invader?"

"No... It was probably one of the children. If my guess is correct... it was probably the short-haired, petite girl."

"...It couldn't be. Wasn't that girl the youngest of all the children captured?"

"Indeed. But, from talking with her, and watching her, I felt like she was older than she appeared. She's probably about eleven years old. Even you were already wielding a

spear on the battlefield when you were six, right?"

In my case though, I had the assistance of memories from my previous life... although this is something I won't say even to Ratoka, so I just shrugged. Whatever the case, Ratoka has been observing the prisoners for quite some time now. Let's trust his judgment, and act on the belief that the short-haired petite girl was the cause of this commotion.

"Ratoka, go to Ergnade and tell him about this situation. I'll chase down the children. If you see Kaldia soldiers on your way, join up with them, and we'll all meet up later."

"Understood."

"Rashiok, can I leave it up to you to track the escaped children?It doesn't seem to be a problem? Let's go then."

I split up from Ratoka again, as I returned onto Rashiok's back.

While holding on to Rashiok's neck, I touched the sword buckled to my waist. Instead of a practical military sword, I was armed with only a ceremonial rapier and a dagger.

Fort Jugfena is a military base currently in the back of the frontlines. Although I'm technically something like Eric's escort, considering that this location was still quite far from the battlefield, I was only minimally armed, it seems that this was a huge mistake on my part. With such a big incident happening right now, I could only curse my carelessness.

The rapier is a weapon that's designed for piercing, cutting and slicing isn't its specialty. In fact, my weapon's blade was terribly dull and blunt.

...With this weapon, even if I don't intend to, I may end up having to kill. And, my own personal safety will be at risk.

Piercing is an attack pattern that leaves you wide open to attacks yourself. Unlike a spear that has a much longer reach, the rapier has only an average length.

Also, – I was concerned about the fact that the walls had collapsed.

That booming and ground shaking impact was clearly the sound of something

explosive. And, none of the captured children could possibly have hidden something capable of causing an explosion.

Exactly how did they do it? Several days have passed by since they became prisoners. It's hard to imagine that it was in their stomachs.

Then, just how did they create such a huge explosion?

Somehow, I had a terrible premonition, one that caused chills to run down my body.

In my mind, I recalled the figure of the woman who made the impossible, possible – that tan-skinned woman who had the ability to manipulate magical beasts.

CHAPTER 185

TRACKING THE CHILDREN IN THE UNDERGROUND PASSAGE

Rashiok ran at full speed through the fort's narrow passages. On our way, we happened to encounter Claudia, and I picked her up. ...Or rather, as always, Claudia did something incomprehensible like managing to jump onto Rashiok's back on her own while Rashiok was at his top speed.

"What are you looking for, Eliza-dono?"

"...The captured children."

"Did they escape!? So, that means the ground shaking earlier was caused by them."

"It seems that way."

"Man... Even though they're enemy soldiers, I don't really like cutting down children. Normally I would use a spear to knock them unconscious, but in the narrow spaces of the fortress, there's not enough space to wield a spear. What should I do? If I knew this would happen, I would have made the edge of my sword blade duller."

...The Kaldia army has encountered child soldiers on the battlefield several times now. I always thought that there were quite a lot of them that ended up as prisoners of war before, was it Claudia's handiwork

Even if they're child soldiers, no, even if they are, anyone that attacks my troops will be treated mercilessly by me. People getting injured or killed in the process of fighting is just standard in the course of war.

I wonder if Claudia has only been knocking people unconscious so far, after all this fighting. I thought about it in surprised silence as my shoulders drooped, while Claudia who had no idea what I was thinking but sensed my mood asked me "Eliza-dono, are you feeling alright?"

While she kept chatting on and on, I bit my tongue, and just as she finished, I accidentally bit my tongue too hard by accident. Indeed, I've never personally witnessed Claudia ever killing anyone.

The escaped child prisoners seemed to be heading down an underground passage that I wasn't familiar with. It's an intricate underground passage system that spread out like a labyrinth below the barracks and training grounds here.

Usually, the soldiers at Fort Jugfena don't use these passages. Some of the passages have been crushed by falling rocks or disrepair, and it was forbidden to enter them due to the danger.

The underground passages weren't very high, the height wasn't enough for me to ride on Rashiok anymore. While having Rashiok follow behind me, we hurried as much as possible while muffling the sound of our footsteps.

"Are they really down in here? Aren't some of the passageways blocked off?"

"The children seem to possess some sort of explosives."

"What are explosives?"

"...Weapons similar to the 'big tube' (cannons) and the 'short-tubed fire-arrows.'"

"Ohh, those! I see, short tubes aside, the big tubes are capable of firing huge rocks that can easily blow apart any stone walls or debris. ...However, how are they using such a weapon?"

Well, if only I knew, I'd feel less stressed. As I talked to Claudia while continuing to progress down the passageways, boom, there was another impact as the ground shook again. From the ceiling, some stone flakes fell.

"...Isn't this a bit dangerous?"

"Considering that this could easily trigger a full collapse of the tunnels, and that we don't know when it could happen, yes, this is probably quite dangerous."

"...We need to hurry up and capture them. I'd rather not be buried under tons of rock."

I thought privately to myself that Claudia would probably be alright even if she was buried under tons of rocks, but I kept that thought a secret.

As we progressed forward, the deterioration of the passageway became more apparent.

“They’re there...”

In the dim passageway, we could see the light shining off torches reflected by the children’s silver hair. It’s the escaped prisoners. They seemed to be hiding in the collapsed debris and looking around to watch the situation.

“Tsk, this is a dead end.”

I heard the clicking of someone’s tongue as someone spoke forcefully and irritated in the Rindarl language. The voice belonged to a young girl. Because of how quiet the tunnels were, it was easy to hear her voice clearly.

“Well then, what should we do?”

When the girl turned around and talked to the other children, the slave children all began whimpering. If Ratoka’s report was correct, is this young girl the one that threatened all the other prisoners and brought them out? She was probably the one that caused the explosion somehow, but how does she keep several tens of prisoners obedient to her with that tiny body of hers? Does she have a collaborator?”

“...Hmm, Sharma. You’ll do just fine. Weren’t you complaining to Vanita just earlier how tired you were?”

You’ll do just fine, what does that mean? We didn’t understand what she meant even though we understood the Rindarl language, so Claudia and I tilted our heads.

However, it seems that those children understood perfectly well what that girl meant. In the flickering torchlight, it was clear to see that those words caused them to move about uneasily. Simultaneously, the piercing sound of children wailing echoed throughout the passageway. The crying girl named Sharma who was singled out by the petite girl was suddenly knocked against the wall somehow, and just as I was

furrowing my eyebrows, wondering what occurred, that's when it happened.

The other children rushed out back in our direction. They abandoned the crying girl named Sharma that was pinned against the wall.

“No!! No!!! Vanita, help, me!”

Was she made unable to move anymore, the girl that had been screaming all this time suddenly fell strangely silent.

Then, in the next instant – pop, I heard an eerie sound of something liquid flowing. And then boom, an explosion occurred for the third time today.

As Claudia and I remained crouching against the ground, we were still quite stunned at what just happened. It was dim and vision was poor. I wasn't absolutely certain. However – however, what just happened, was most likely.

“...Using a shorty like Sharma, even if I blow her up, the explosion's power seems to have decreased, I guess I should have expected it.”

As the debris started settling down after the explosion, the petite girl started talking to herself, and my suspicions were confirmed.

That girl was using the other children themselves, as explosives.

CHAPTER 186

VANITA'S ENTREATY

It was such a repulsive sight that I felt nauseated. In order to help me bear the nausea, I held on to Claudia's sleeve as she crouched next to me.

As if she was a lithe predator, Claudia had a low body posture that seemed like she was ready to pounce at any instant. Her sky blue eyes were glittering in the darkness.

...Claudia's essence was that of a knight. She's never personally talked with me about what exactly she does on the battlefield, but I know that she's never strayed from her morals. Because of her chivalric code, she's never killed any children whether they're enemies or not, and unless I order an ambush specifically, she'll only attack directly from the front as an honorable knight would do.

Although Claudia has her knight's chivalry, I'm going to give her the order that this girl absolutely can't be forgiven.

However, the only person with me currently is Claudia, and it'll be troublesome for me if she rushes in recklessly without a plan. The enemy girl seemed quite vigilant, and she always moved with a minimum of three children around her. And since we don't know the conditions for her to use that explosion magic, we can't rush in due to the risk factor.

"...Can you bring Vanita here to me under the cover of darkness?"

In a low whisper, I gave a command to Claudia. I felt like we should act as quickly as possible. The children had pulled back close to the immediate vicinity of the mountain of rubble we were hiding in. I think that if we act now, that girl might not notice if we bring Vanita back to where we're hiding.

Claudia didn't make a single sound in the dim tunnel, as she used dexterous movements to ambush and drag one of the taller children back to where I was.

"...!?!!?"

Claudia had gagged him in order for him to not shout out, and I whispered to the frightened Vanita that it was me, for him to calm down. Vanita relaxed his body after finding out that it was me. And when Claudia released her hand from his mouth, Vanita inquired "why are you here?" in a low voice.

"We came chasing after you guys."

"There's only two of you, how unreasonable... Please, you should return while you still can. I want to help you guys... But I don't want to die here, in a place like this..."

At Vanita's entreaty, Claudia and I looked at each other. He says he wants to help us, but he's also saying for us to return while we still can.

"...That girl, Mefuri, I don't know how, but she has the magic ability to explode us. Those explosions are powerful enough to blow up anything in close proximity. We still don't want to die... Please, I'm begging you, don't fight Mefuri..."

".....Eliza-dono, Vanita has bits and pieces of human flesh and blood stuck to his body."

I was momentarily at a loss for words.

He's begging me to not fight this girl named Mefuri, and in addition to that, Vanita was covered thickly in blood, and had the smell of burnt human flesh on his body, that probably came from the exploded girl. While the stench was disgusting and difficult to breathe through – my head actually got cooler and colder. It's as if cold water was being poured through my brain and started freezing over, that's how much it hurt.

...The scene that rushed with great momentum into my mind was my defensive battle at Ritox Plateau during the war with Rindarl, which happened less than a year ago. In order to prevent the enemies from invading through that chokepoint, I burned people alive, and threw child soldiers into the burning pit of impaled enemy prisoners.

"Rashiok."

My voice sounded ruthless and icy. Even though I was listening to my own voice, it felt so distant from me.

Rashiok who was breathing quietly and hiding himself in absolute darkness, obediently poked his face out towards me. Vanita was just about to scream at the sight

so I gagged his mouth again with my hand this time, as I rubbed my face against Rashiok's nose. It was a cold and damp feeling, it strangely matched my brain that felt like it was freezing over in cold rage.

"Can your wind magic handle the impact from that explosion?"

I asked intending to find out if he could protect us from the blast, but Rashiok responded with a low growl. It seems that it would be impossible.

After the loss of one of his wings, Rashiok was no longer able to fly in the air, and his wind magic was greatly weakened. His wind magic is only at the level of a slight breeze these days.

"Then, can your scales withstand the force of that explosion?"

Rashiok answered negatively again. Well, since that explosion could blow apart stone walls, this was to be expected.

"...Then, the last question. Is it possible for you to peel off those three children around her, faster than our prey can realize?"

Woof, he barked softly and affirmatively. Certainly. Good child, I told Rashiok as I stroked his head.

"What are you planning...?"

Witnessing my exchange with Rashiok, Vanita seemed dubious. His single leg made a slight sound as he adjusted his body. Behind him was Claudia, and as I expected, she had soundlessly unsheathed her sword.

"I've decided. I'm going to capture the escaped prisoners... that's my goal."

"That's impossible, stop it! We'll all die... Unn!?"

Vanita protested in a small voice and tried to grab me, but he was instantly knocked unconscious by Claudia.

"Have a rest here. Perhaps, this might even save you. -I'm sorry, but I have no time to spare. And if you have to die, it might as well be here."

Just as I finished talking to the unconscious Vanita, a heavy sound came from above and small sandy fragments fell from the ceiling.

...That was the sound of horses. What's more, it was several dozen, or even several hundred horses.

-If I calmly analyze this situation, if there's such a movement within the fortress at this time, it could only mean that something must be happening on the battlefield. Causing unpredictable confusion to us would be advantageous for the enemy's attack. Our scouts had already reported to us that their troops had moved out.

Going at a fast speed by horse, it's half a day's distance to the most frontline position from Fort Jugfena. Our royal army that barely just returned to the fort must be moving out again. This could only mean that – war had fully broken out again, after a lull of eight months.

CHAPTER 187

MINEFIELD OF FLESH AND BLOOD

Suddenly, the shaky children in the tunnel started screaming. Probably because she knew that an attack was coming at the same time as her planned prison escape, Mefuri was the only one looking at the ceiling calmly.

Her attention wasn't on her surroundings, and her vigilance level was somewhat reduced – this is the best chance for an ambush.

“Go!”

I pushed on Claudia and Rashiok's backs. One human and one beast... or should I say two beasts? They jumped out soundlessly from the rubble as if they were shot out of a slingshot.

The sounds of the children screaming increased in level and kept echoing as the tunnel fell into complete darkness. While blocking my ears with the collar of my coat, I focused all my attention on what was happening in the darkness.

I could barely make out the figure of Rashiok lightly tossing aside and gently throwing them against the wall in the commotion. I couldn't tell what Claudia was doing.

“Shut up!! My head hurts, so you bastards need to shut up immediately!!”

Mefuri was shouting hysterically above the din. It seems that she was still childish in this aspect. As expected, her voice echoed in these tunnels, and I was able to roughly guess her position.

Like this, I might be able to defeat her... But yep, it happened just when I was feeling a little relieved.

Pop, there was an unsettling sound. Just then, one of the children that Rashiok lightly bit and was tossing away, turned into a small explosion by his nose.

Boom, and since Rashiok received such an impact at a close distance, he started

howling.

The smell of burnt flesh spread wider within the tunnels. I realized that Rashiok had instantly distanced himself from the remaining children by taking huge strides.

It was silent for a moment. And then, the children became more panicked than earlier, as Mefuri made her move.

“...Heh, ahahaha! Idiots!! You’re really idiots!!”

The girl who was laughing in a high-pitched, sarcastic tone of voice moved around the area of the explosion. What is she intending – why was she able to accurately create an explosion and injure Rashiok in the darkness, even though I know I’ll be at a disadvantage if I’m passive and let her be the proactive one, I can’t make any reckless moves until I understand her power first.

“At the very least, even if I can’t see anything, I ‘know’ the location of my own bombs!!”

The girl’s tone was mocking as if she wanted to incite me, and popping sounds kept going off around her.

And then boom, boom, with sounds of something exploding, small sparks lit up around Mefuri, and illuminated the shivering children that were clinging to the walls.

...Is she unable to control the power of her explosions, and the power depends on the “material” she uses?

And the reason why the explosion that hit Rashiok wasn’t as powerful as the earlier ones, wasn’t because she wasn’t trying, like the ones that had enough force to blow apart stone walls, ...but it was probably because the child’s body that was the “bomb” had already been torn to pieces before Rashiok tossed it.

And in place of a light, she lit up countless small pieces of flesh and blood, and a horrendous sight now entered my view. Flesh and blood were blown everywhere, ...the girl’s horrifying “magic” gave me an impression I’ll never forget.

She definitely wasn’t using anything like bombs concealed in her stomach, she had the ability to freely explode body parts like arms and legs or any flesh, this was most definitely some type of magic power. Just like Diferis that I killed before, she has a

power that's beyond human comprehension.

With the makeshift lighting, Claudia who had been concealing her presence made the first attack and attempted to ambush Mefuri, jumping out at her. However, Mefuri quickly noticed her presence, and lightly shook her right hand. I heard some slight popping sounds again, and Claudia must have detected danger as well, because she instantly jumped backwards right as the location where her feet just were exploded.

“Is it really alright if you escape in that direction?”

Pop. With a boom that rocked the air, the child standing closest to Claudia exploded. That child didn't even have the time to scream.

“-Urgh!!”

Together with the exploding flesh and blood, Claudia was blown away by the explosion. -This is bad.

“See, you were blown – wah!!?”

I hurriedly jumped out of the rubble mountain with my sword drawn, and slashed at Mefuri. She twisted her body greatly in order to dodge me, and had a look of surprise on her face for an instant as she looked at me, then she attempted to put distance between us.

...As I expected, it seems that she herself was also vulnerable to her own explosions. In that case, it will be fatal for me to allow her to put distance between us. I pressed the attack and pursued her closely, while Mefuri retreated even farther back with an impatient expression on her face.

“Stop following me!”

Mefuri picked something up from the ground and threw it at me. It violently exploded in midair, and I was forced to retreat.

“Rashiok!!”

Rashiok's wind magic answered my call, and managed to scatter away the pieces of flesh and blood from the explosion – that most likely came from a child's arm.

“Take this-!!”

At almost the same time as the flesh explosion, I threw my short sword into the bloody mist surrounding Mefuri, and it pierced into her shoulder.

CHAPTER 188

SUPPRESSION AND A STRANGE FEELING

Although I was able to use my coat to cover myself and block some of the debris from the flesh explosion, I was still blown away and rolled several times on the ground in the tunnel. Some of my hair seems to have been singed, I could smell a nauseating burnt scent.

I tried to catch my breath and recover my balance, but I couldn't stop myself from a coughing fit and regurgitating what was in my stomach. My vomit scattered everywhere as it made splashing sounds.

I was so dizzy that I could only crawl along the ground to try and hide in the darkness again.

Meanwhile, Mefuri was screaming from the pain from my sword having pierced her. She was crying such things such as how unbelievable the pain was. Her high-pitched childlike voice echoed throughout the tunnel and my head. The other remaining children shrunk themselves against the walls as much as they possibly could, as if to hide from her.

She's reacting this strongly to having a sword stuck in her shoulder. Is she actually not trained for battle?

"-Rashiok, Claudia!"

Because I'm currently in a state where I'm too dizzy to move, I can only rely on them. I twisted my body while breathing quickly to look at Mefuri who was in the light. Mefuri seemed to have completely lost control of her temper and was angrily yelling while attempting to peel one of the children off of the wall.

"Hurry up and obey me!! Do you want to be exploded and die that quickly!!?"

She was threatening the child with the sword that she removed from her shoulder, while looking around her uneasily.

“...Hey, don’t get away from that wall!! This tunnel might collapse at any moment if she explodes that wall! Unless she’s willing to risk being buried alive, she can’t kill you guys!!”

I endured my nausea and summoned my energy to shout that towards the children, while Mefuri angrily responded with a “shut up!!” in my general direction.

-Aiming for Mefuri’s momentary distraction, Claudia suddenly attacked her soundlessly from the darkness and sent her petite body flying.

“Wah!? You... get off me!!”

Did Claudia throw away her blood and flesh-covered clothes, she was basically in only her underwear, but every time Mefuri scratched at Claudia’s hair and arms, I saw the spark of tiny explosions.

“Claudia...!”

However, being the most competent knight I knew, Claudia didn’t even let out a groan. She bit her lips to endure the pain, and in a break between the small explosions, even while covered in blood she was able to grab on to Mefuri and throw Mefuri over her own back in a brilliant move.

As Mefuri hit the ground, Claudia instantly had her sword against Mefuri’s throat.

The underground passageway returned to dead silence. The remaining children seemed to be trembling while keeping as quiet as possible and observing Claudia and Mefuri.

“-Normally, I use spears.”

Claudia began calmly talking to Mefuri who was still on the ground.

“The Rolentsor family’s spears are so sharp that a piece of paper falling on the spear tip would be sliced in two. The swords we use are also the sharpest around.”

As Claudia talked, Mefuri attempted to do something with her right hand, but Claudia used her empty left hand to twist Mefuri’s arm behind her back. Claudia’s expression distorted as Mefuri screamed again.

“However, I loathe the idea of killing children. That’s why I would appreciate it if you could give up without resisting. You should just sit there obediently and wait for my master to decide whether to kill you or not.”

“...W, what!? D, don’t joke with me – Eek!?”

Rashiok suddenly appeared on top of Mefuri unexpectedly as she was ranting. Claudia was still smiling calmly while holding her sword against Mefuri’s throat.

“Well, I’m saying it for your own sake that you should sit there obediently. Because of my code of chivalry, I prefer to avoid doing anything to a child... but this draconis here is just like my lord, even if you’re only a young girl, there won’t be any mercy for you.”

...Um, hey.

Well, I suppose it’s just like she says.

Just as I wished, Claudia was able to capture Mefuri alive, but I had a subtle indescribable feeling as I watched her begin to tie Mefuri up.

At any rate, we’ve successfully captured the escaped prisoners with this.

With Rashiok helping me, I stood up again in the tunnel that returned to darkness once more.

The thick smell of blood lingered in the air. I felt like I could hear auditory hallucinations of the children that were still crying out in fear.

CHAPTER 189

DISCARDED CHESS PIECE

After tying up Mefuri's arms and legs as well as even blindfolding and gagging her, we finally left the underground passage.

We didn't know the exact conditions for Mefuri to activate her magic yet, so I could only go off the example of Diferis who had to use arm gestures and her voice in order to activate magic.

As for Mefuri's explosions, although I inferred that preliminary preparations must have been necessary for her to be able to explode the children, I still didn't know the details. Because I had accidentally touched Mefuri, along with the fact that we had to carefully keep a distance from the remaining children while returning in the dark and narrow tunnel, Claudia, Rashiok, and I were all exhausted by the time we returned to the fort.

Again, while we didn't know the details, it seemed that Mefuri could grasp the position of her "bombs" even without relying on her vision, a fact that gave us great pressure. I think that perhaps her sense isn't perfect, as she didn't notice the fact that we took Vanita in the darkness and then knocked him unconscious... as Vanita could be one of her living bombs as well.

"So, what are you going to do?"

Without concealing the fatigue on her face, Claudia indicated towards Mefuri. I confirmed that the children hadn't come out of the tunnels yet, and placed my hand on my neck without saying anything. Just in case Mefuri attempted to explode the remaining children, we had ordered them to follow along far behind us.

"Persuading her will be rather..."

Claudia seemed both unwilling to forgive this girl as well as being unwilling to kill her if at all possible.

"She's most likely not one of the slaves from Nazric. Her appearance might mean she's

from Epadena... or, she could be someone from Rindarl originally that has southern blood in her."

Maybe Claudia was unsure if what I said was accurate or not, she furrowed her eyebrows as she looked down at the bound Mefuri that she was dragging along behind her.

Mefuri seemed to be recoiling in fear at our voices as she breathed raggedly through the cloth gag that was roughly stuffed in her mouth. ...Although she's the enemy's agent, with her young age Rindarl probably only taught her about how to use her ability. Now that she's been defeated and has become our prisoner for real this time, she seems to have completely lost her calm.

Although she's still young and it would be typical behavior for her age, it could still be some sort of trap for me to lower my guard.

"How pitiful."

Claudia suddenly made a comment.

Her heavy tone of voice was clearly because she expected this to end in Mefuri's execution, but Mefuri wouldn't know that. Mefuri finally stopped throwing a tantrum, and attempted to crawl closer to Claudia.

...The sight of her seemed so miserable. She was probably around eleven years old, covered in blood and tied with ropes, and was struggling like a dying insect to wriggle closer to the people that would probably end up killing her. Her trembling body and shaky knees indicated her fear of us though, I couldn't imagine that she could possibly be acting.

"..., ..."

I think that I most likely had a terribly cold and ruthless look as I was looking at her.

"...Indeed, it's truly pitiful. It doesn't matter what kind of magic power beyond human understanding she possesses, with how young she is it's obvious that she's just a chess piece whose fate is to be used and thrown away."

"Eliza-dono?"

Claudia seemed surprised as she looked at me. Mefuri who seemed like she was almost at death's door also heard my statement. Perhaps she received a huge shock, she violently jerked her body.

"This child was betrayed and abandoned. It would be normal for her to be executed if she was captured. For whoever sent these children here, the person in charge probably considered it nothing even if this girl died here as well."

Mefuri kept shaking her head as if she didn't enjoy hearing me talk. Her body language was shouting that she didn't want to listen to this. However, it's not like she has any options. Since she was the cause of all this, she no longer has the freedom to choose.

"-Whoever sent this child here surely isn't capable of rational strategizing. Wasting and allowing someone with such magic power to be killed like this... Well, if this child had been my soldier, I would never have done such a terrible thing."

Pitter patter, there was the sound of something liquid leaking out of Mefuri's eyes and dripping to the stone floor even through her blindfold.

As this incomparably pitiful young girl tried crawling towards my feet, I still looked at her with an expression of cold ruthlessness.

-I'm perfectly aware that what I'm doing is attempting to brainwash her. She seems like the type who wouldn't obediently answer my questions, so first I must use psychological attacks to break her spirit.

Since she's not an Arxian, I absolutely can't trust her because I don't know what morals she's been raised with.

If I can't trust her, I can't make use of her, so breaking her spirit is the best method I know.

CHAPTER 190

INTERROGATION TIME AND MURKY EYES

While taking Mefuri who seemed to have gotten more obedient along with us, for the time being I decided to place the rest of the escaped slave children soldiers into the barracks.

The barracks at Fort Jugfena also has a room that can serve as an interrogation room. As the leader of the Kaldia army, I was informed beforehand on how to unlock it. In order to prevent its misuse, a simple but special method must be used to unlock the door, one that would be difficult for outsiders to figure out.

My Kaldia army soldiers were awaiting orders in the dining hall. Since they were all gathered here, it meant that Ratoka must have done as I instructed and summoned them together, but Ratoka didn't seem to be here for some reason.

“My lord!”

“I’ve returned, report the situation to me... Gunther’s not here?”

When I looked around, not only was Ratoka missing, Gunther was absent as well. Was he off together with Ratoka somewhere?

“My lord, you’re injured? Come, let’s get that treated right away.”

“More importantly than that, Claudia’s injuries are worse than mine.”

“She got injured! What, it couldn’t be!”

“Claudia-sama was seriously injured...!?”

“So this wasn’t the blood from the enemy!!?”

The soldiers were in a ruckus at seeing the state Claudia was in. I simply received a towel and began wiping the vomit and blood off of my body, but they made a simple makeshift bed for Claudia to rest on and placed her on it respectfully.

When the blood covering Claudia was wiped away as well, I discovered that Claudia was in a worse condition than I thought. ...The skin on her fingers and wrists had been burnt by explosions. Her beautiful blonde hair was also singed in many places.

Well, at least hair will grow back... The skin on her fingers and wrists, that could be much worse...

As I bit down on my lips, perhaps Mefuri who was behind us felt a disturbance in the air, her shoulders started trembling. Although she was still tied up, blindfolded, and gagged, she seemed sensitive to the people nearby her. I don't know if it's part of her magical powers, though.

"House the captured child prisoners under our protection in three separate rooms. Claudia, please choose a unit for me to do this task."

"...Then, the third unit."

The army unit that Claudia designated split itself into three smaller teams, and took the remaining children to the three rooms picked for their temporary accommodation.

"My lord, what about that girl?"

"...She's under my personal jurisdiction."

Mefuri seemed anxious as the soldiers glanced at her. It seemed that she was still able to detect their gazes upon her, she was rather restless and unsettled.

"Mefuri, this way."

When I called her, she hesitantly and obediently walked in my direction. With her senses taken away from her, human nature would be that she was frightened of moving, it should be a stressful situation for her. Well, that was part of the reason why I had Mefuri blindfolded.

"I'm going to ask you some yes or no questions. Nod for yes and shake your head for no."

Mefuri nodded her head slightly. Being surrounded by soldiers seems to have heightened her feeling of tension.

“Firstly, about your magic ability. You have the power to explode things, correct?”

She nodded. The soldiers were in a momentary uproar at hearing this, and they all went on guard against Mefuri. Her shoulders were trembling as if she was frightened.

“Are humans the only thing that you can explode? – No? Then, humans and magical beasts? -Oh, still wrong?”

Mefuri’s ability seemed to have wider applications than I realized.

“Then, animals as well – what, it even includes plants?”

She nodded in confirmation at those.

She could even explode plants... The more I found out about her ability, the scarier it sounded, I was shivering as well.

“So you can even explode plants... So I suppose you could even explode dead leaves, then?”

That was just an expression of my admiration for the extent of her power, but it seemed that Mefuri interpreted it as another question. She seemed confused at how to respond, then shook her head.

...What part of that was she saying no to? ...She was unable to explode dead leaves? She was just exploding corpses and body parts earlier. What exactly was her power...

“Is it that you can only explode living things, then?”

She nodded affirmatively. I see.

-After that, I kept asking Mefuri many questions and got a clear grasp on Mefuri’s ability by the time that the first aid treatment for Claudia was over.

It seemed that the weakness of her ability was the condition to become something she could explode. To be able to explode something, she had to be touching it beforehand continuously for about half a day. Not only that, she could only do it to one living thing at a time, she couldn’t prepare two living things as bombs simultaneously. Among the remaining captured children, it seemed that there were only three left that could be

exploded by her. Apparently, she turned them into her bombs without arousing suspicion by holding hands while sleeping with them.

The explosion's power would depend on the type and mass of what was used, Mefuri herself was unable to control the power. However, she had a sense for how strong the explosion would be.

And, the greatest limit to her power was the detonation distance. In order to explode her bombs, the bomb must be able to hear Mefuri's voice, and Mefuri must give a verbal command personally. Meaning, no matter how close Mefuri's bombs were to her, if something loud drowned out her voice or if there was a soundproof wall between them, she wouldn't be able to explode her living bombs.

Even after exploding a living bomb, she could still explode the corpse's body parts again, but that was limited by the fact that the explosions would be much smaller and Mefuri had to be within the body's range.

She also had the ability to sense the locations of her bombs that were close to her, as well as being able to sense the maximum range that she could detonate her bombs at, it's unmistakable that her ability was powerful despite its limitations.

“...Got it. Then, I shall have your bindings and blindfold removed. The gag shall remain, you should have no objections, right?”

Mefuri nodded affirmatively.

I drew my short sword so that I could kill Mefuri at a moment's notice if need be, as I indicated to the soldier standing behind Mefuri to remove her blindfold first.

...But, hmm. Was this “good” enough already?

As the blindfold was removed, her cloudy, muddy, murky eyes that seemed like they were dreaming were revealed – I confidently looked down on her with my own eyes that were as cold as ice.

CHAPTER 191

COMBAT SITUATION

While I was preoccupied with Mefuri in the underground tunnels, the combat situation that had stagnated for eight months suddenly changed all at once.

At almost the same time as Mefuri's escape from the dungeon, Densel's army began a massive attack, marching out its entire army from its largest city, Eris. Their target was our small defensive bases that we previously captured from them, and our troops at the farthest frontline base which was on a hillside and named Fort Droyan were already engaging them.

Unexpectedly, the Arxian army was ambushed even though they were expecting the enemy's attack. At the second defensive base, Fort Droidas, which is located on a tributary of the Tave River, they detected an enemy platoon of ships arriving from the sea's direction.

The enemy's naval troops seemed to be under a different chain of command from the Densel army. The Arxian troops stationed at Fort Droyan were caught in a surprise pincer attack and defeated. They no longer even have the option of retreating and abandoning their base, and have been encircled and are currently under siege.

Currently on the battlefield, we were facing two of the enemy army's units, with the forces stationed at Fort Droyan that were now under siege, as well as the relief troops from Fort Droidas and the third defensive base Fort Droitros.

Our draconis scout teams were able to detect the enemy army's march from a long distance away, so each base was able to smoothly prepare for combat and be on guard for battle.

However, the main forces of the Arxian army, the Royal Army under the command of Marquis Rolentsor, had returned to Fort Jugfena to rest, and the new troops that Egnade, leader of the Fort Jugfena knights, was bringing weren't even close to arriving when battle already started. Fort Droyan's remaining troops were mostly scout troops and guerilla troops, so they could only focus on defending their fort, while the relief troops from Fort Droidas that consisted of mostly cavalry troops which were

getting bogged down forced to fight the enemy's naval troops in order to attempt crossing the river. It would take Fort Jugfena's forces at least half a day to reach where the fighting was, an extremely disadvantageous state for the beginning of Arxia's battle.



“...Will the enemy find out immediately about our troops organizing and moving out?”

After I finished questioning and brainwashing... I mean, persuading Mefuri, I headed to meet Wiegraf with one of the senior officers in my army as well as one of the cavalry squad leaders, Agil, in place of the injured Claudia.

Even in a combat situation, Wiegraf seemed calm and composed and even worked on his other duties while explaining the combat situation to me.

At a glance, the documents he was working on were about Wiegraf's decision as the person with full authority over Fort Jugfena to temporarily move the rearmost Arxian base from Fort Jugfena and establish a communication base in the rolling hills, much closer to the area of combat.

The communication base would be forcibly taking over one of Densel's rural villages, an action that hasn't been permitted by Arxian nobility that feared any action deemed as invasive. Well, considering that the battle situation has become quite ugly, I suppose that we're just going to have to pretend that there's no such order restricting us from doing so.

“I don't want to think about the possibility that there are spies among us Arxiants, but...”

Wiegraf seemed so relaxed even though he was currently perusing information on the roughly just over two thousand knights and soldiers stationed at Fort Jugfena, as well as the information on the Royal Army here which numbered over ten thousand.

He glanced over at me for less than a second before instantaneously returning his gaze to the documents in front of him. He seemed to deeply trust in me.

“...Ahh, more importantly, I have a message for you from Ergnade. He borrowed Elise, Gunther, and Oscar from your army.”

“Ergnade did?”

I was quite shocked at the fact that he took some of my personnel with him without even asking me first, and Wiegraf sighed as if he had a headache.

“Indeed. He said that he apologizes for it, but because of the current situation he asked the three of them to safely escort Eric-sama back to the Kaldia domain. Of course, some of Jugfena’s soldiers are with them as well.”

“Ahh.”

So that’s why he even used Elise who was really Ratoka, I finally understood. Even in our current circumstances, it would be necessary to spare some people to move Eric and ensure his safety. Since he referred to Ratoka as “Elise,” it meant that Ratoka was currently acting as “Eliza” while escorting Eric back to safety. I wouldn’t actually be able to go back, as I need to stay here and command the Kaldia army. I have no reason to complain about Ergnade’s judgement, as he did what he decided was best during a chaotic situation.

Although I don’t have any complaints... Ergnade shouldn’t have known about Ratoka. The only people here that know of Ratoka’s existence are me, Claudia, and Gunther and Oscar that Ergnade happened to make use of.

When did Ergnade realize? No matter how similar Ratoka looks to me, using him as my substitute isn’t an idea a normal person would come up with.

At almost the same time as my doubt, I felt like I obtained the answer from the smile in Wiegraf’s eyes.

“It’s excellent that you understand so quickly. Now then, shall we also leave Fort Jugfena? We need to make the preparations for the communication base as soon as possible.”

CHAPTER 192

TO THE REAR COMMUNICATION BASE

We took over and moved our rear communication base to one of Densel's villages, named Clement village. The Densel farmers were all trying to remain as silent as possible as they trembled while watching our soldiers that had arrived from Fort Jugfena.

...I've heard that Rindarl has a law about treating the civilians of other countries fairly.

To begin with, the Rindarl Union is made up of the countries that split up from the original vast former Rindarl Kingdom. Historically, this law has always in place to help assimilate the citizens of any conquered country into its territory.

However, that law of theirs has nothing whatsoever to do with Arxia.

Ever since Arxia became an established country in its current state, Arxia has become a major isolationist country, and it's been six hundred years since Arxia has last had any wartime agreements with other countries.

Just thirty years ago, there was war between the Densel Dukedom and the now destroyed Artolas Kingdom. According to the Clement villagers, armies from both sides occupied this village back then as well.

That's why some of the villagers still had memories from that time.

Unlike thirty years ago where they would be assured of survival as long as they remained obedient, we had more soldiers this time, so they had less food as we needed to take their food to provide for our soldiers. It was a worse treatment than the previous war.

Clement village had an atmosphere filled with anxiety and distrust at not knowing if they could believe their lives would be guaranteed even if they complied with our orders.

The atmosphere felt so heavy, pressing down against me from all sides, that I was

reminded of that day when I first arrived in Cyril village.



“This isn’t exactly a pleasant atmosphere.”

As soon as Wiegraf finally got a chance to sit down and rest, as he’d been running around setting things up right after we arrived, he complained to me about the feeling in the air. He looked as if he was a drowning person pleading for assistance, and I nodded in sympathy.

Although it was uncomfortable, my Kaldia army and I had already gotten used to this type of atmosphere thanks to prior experience. However, the soldiers and knights from Fort Jugfena, having no such previous experience in dealing with angry civilians, were quite shaken by it all.

It won’t be good to expose them to such negative emotions for a prolonged period when we haven’t even reached the frontlines yet.

“If something ignites the spark, do you think there could be an uprising?”

“...You’re annoyingly right about the possibility.”

“Although it’s a shameful story, in the past, I’ve been in a similar situation to this before.”

“Even though I don’t want to believe that you have such an experience since you’ve barely just become a teenager, it’s quite regretful that you had such a childhood, isn’t it...”

Wiegraf muttered so as he clutched at his head.

We’ve taken over the largest residence in the village as our strategy room, which was the village mayor’s house. From the window, I could see the area where the farmers were gathered together.

Even before we made this village into our temporary rear communication base, the Arxian army’s been forcing the village to turn over most of their food supplies to us so we could use it as provisions for the front lines. It’s been eight months since then. All

the farmers were working on their agricultural work while being guarded by soldiers, and their faces were grim while their eyes contained both fear and anger.

“...This is basically the same as slavery.”

I stated it as I saw it. The Arxian Kingdom doesn’t recognize slavery. But right now, these Rindarl farmers have no guarantee of their lives, no freedom, and they must give all the food they produce other than enough for them to eat over to us... Whether they’re called slaves or serfs, what’s the difference?

I have no intention of sympathizing with the Rindarl citizens, though. They should have been informed already that they could convert to the Church of Arxia’s Xia sect when the occupation began in order to receive asylum.

It’s just that these people have nothing to do with their country’s actions. Since their everyday lives are basically no different now from that of slaves, heavy feelings have been welling up within them.

“Originally, for the war with Densel, Arxia had been intending to eventually release the Densel prisoners of war to Planates. But since Planates has declared their enmity towards us as well over the Prince Albert incident, Arxia will no longer be able to release the prisoners until the war is over. ...Only when the war is over will talks about the captured prisoners of war finally be possible.”

Wiegraf ended up responding to my sarcastic remark meant only as irony, as he took out and spread a map on the table after only such a short rest.

When the war is over, eh. I see; indeed, I should try to help conclude this war as fast as possible.

“If only this war could have been over already. For example, eight months ago.”

“Well, well. According to our beloved country of Arxia, it’s important for us to keep our non-interference policy for the so-called sake of everyone’s peace.”

Wiegraf didn’t even attempt to hide his irritation as he said so. He began arranging chess pieces on the map as red pigeons kept arriving for us with reports on the battle situation at the frontlines.

I stopped watching the farmers outside and returned my focus to the table in front of me. It's time for strategizing.

"-Alrighty, I know it's all quite sudden, but you're going to have to get quite busy and move out again as well."

It seemed almost ironical when Wiegraf took some red flowers from the flower vase in the house, bent them, and placed them on the map as a marking.

The place where he marked for me was – farther east of the rolling hills where the current frontline battles were taking place. It was the capital of Densel, its largest city as well as the home base of the entire Densel army, the city of Eris.

CHAPTER 193

A “VERY BRIGHT” NIGHT FOR ERIS

According to Wiegraf, this battle plan had been thought up by Ratoka.

Wiegraf even went to the extent of joking that he wished Ratoka was still here with us instead of on his escort mission. He mentioned how he couldn't afford to overwork me as I was just one domain lord in this entire war, although his tone of voice indicated that he clearly wasn't being serious.

While Wiegraf doesn't resemble his younger brother Egnade that much in physical appearance, he gave me a comment of “haha, wasn't that quite interesting?” while grinning just like Egnade would.

Well, I didn't get the joke. He also told me that this battle plan was nicknamed “the five Earl Kaldias,” which I didn't know how to respond to either.

“The fact that the enemy army sent out scouts just to confirm your current location means that they consider you a dangerous existence. For you to suddenly appear on the frontlines when they don't expect it, that'll give a huge blow to their morale more than anything else.”

Well, he may have a point. Considering the slaughter that I masterminded at Ritox Plateau, I'm quite aware of my own infamy.

I'm not familiar with how much knowledge Rindarl has of Arxian internal affairs, but they must feel uneasy at not having seen me for the past eight months.

In this world, it's very rare to have a system where all the noble children gather together in one place to receive an education. Considering the fact that Arxia is an isolationist country, the fact that I went to noble school to study shouldn't be well known abroad.

The strategy of the mischievously named battle plan was simple. I shall ride the white draconis that's taken a liking to Rashiok, while Rashiok and his other three draconis siblings already in the Jugfena army will each have a knight disguised to look like me

riding them. Taking advantage of our aerial mobility and their lack of knowledge about us, we'll ambush the enemy's capital Eris and its navy stationed on the Tave River, aiming to cause chaos to the enemy.

With me on the white draconis, I shall head directly for Eris together with the three Jugfena draconis, while Rashiok will head for the Tave River navy as he can't fly. After attacking Eris, we're to head for the Tave River as well. It seems that I'll be taking on the entire enemy army stationed in Eris as well as their navy while on the white draconis.

...I'm a bit concerned about riding on the white draconis that's still a wild draconis, but most likely I'm the only one that she'll allow to ride on her due to her viewing me as Rashiok's leader. I don't think that I'm necessarily being asked to do something unreasonable, but I still have my doubts.

Since we're a half-day's distance from the battlefield by horseback, this fixes the problem of not being able to get there on time, but I wonder what will end up happening.



"Vedwoka, please stop here."

While observing the circular city that spread out below me, I stroked the neck of the beautiful white draconis beneath me that was obedient but seemed restless. I named her Vedwoka after the name of an ancient god from the Jugfena region just like Rashiok. As I expected, she definitely didn't allow anyone other than me to even approach her, but she did end up obeying my orders to separate from Rashiok.

I could already feel from her the same type of trust and intimacy as how Rashiok acted around me, so I accepted her long snake-like tail that was stroking my face. It's said that draconis use their tails to express many emotions, such as pounding it to express dissatisfaction or disagreement as well.

As usual, the sun had set long ago in the direction of the Amon Nor Mountains. We watched the night sky gradually brighten as we flew over the buildings that the other Jugfena knights flying with me and I had marked as targets. The sunrise was to be our signal to begin our attack.

When we saw the bright edges of the sun peeking over the mountain's summit, we each lit a matchstick and dropped it into a large cloth sack we were carrying filled with sawdust. Then, we each made sure that they were burning heartily by swinging the bags around with the ropes they were attached to.

Now then, it's time for the Densel citizens to wake up to a roaring fire instead of the morning sun like usual.

As the sun continued to rise, our draconis dived in unison.

I cut the ropes attaching the sack to Vedwoka's belly, so that the burning sawdust within that had previously been soaked in oil fell down upon Densel's capital city, Eris.

"I'm counting on you, Vedwoka."

At my signal, Vedwoka began mightily flapping her wings. With assistance from her wind magic, the flames suddenly spread everywhere.

Most people in Eris were still asleep at this early hour, so this fire spread quickly and quietly without them realizing.

I gave the next signal after confirming that all the fires we set were now at a level which wouldn't easily be put out.

"...Alright, it's time to go to our next location. We have to make some time to properly go and greet the Densel army stationed at Eris. Although it's a bit of a bother to do so."

Although I know that Vedwoka wasn't raised by humans so she doesn't understand the Arxian language, it's my habit from riding Rashiok to always talk to him.

Vedwoka was still able to understand my intention though, so she flew up once more into the sky as I began to hear the explosive crackling sounds of the city that was built mostly of wood burning, as well the screams of the soldiers who finally realized what was happening at the crack of dawn to Eris.

CHAPTER 194

PAINFUL NOSTALGIA BECOMING FUEL FOR THE FIRE

...And that was what happened during my attack on Eris. Let's go back to the time of the strategy meeting.

"Tomorrow morning at dawn, the attack on Eris will commence. This attack will completely be the independent decision of me and you, and perhaps it'll even be our final battle against the enemy invading army, so that's why I decided to act on a large scale this time. You can even go ahead and think of it as my treat!"

Me and you, so Wiegraf says, but his rank in the military is much higher than mine so this should really be called his independent decision. I see, we currently don't have the time to discuss with the general commander who's currently at Fort Drofy or with the royal palace back in Arxia's capital, so this can only be a pragmatic independent decision.

"Each draconis heading to Eris will be equipped with a large sack the size of approximately two or three adults, filled with sawdust drenched in flammable oil. We're going to target its military facilities as well as the castle of the lord of Eris. We'll use the draconis' wind magic to spread the fire as much as possible."

...Indeed, this is indeed on a rather large scale. Wiegraf was talking calmly yet happily about such a strategy, so I strongly felt his resemblance to Egnade. And now I'm learning that the former strategist Wiegraf also views my infamy as an excellent weapon to be used against the enemy.

Although technically we're supposed to receive permission first from the highest-ranked nobles in order to attack an enemy city, if we carry out this operation using only me and the Jugfena knights, the legal risk will be almost zero. It's certain that we'll be scolded for taking an independent action, but it won't be a big deal as long as we don't get the royal army involved. That's why it's okay for me to do this by only borrowing the Jugfena knights' assistance.

No matter how much criticism I receive, as long as we deal a critical blow to the enemy to the extent that they won't want to fight us anymore, I'm prepared to do anything in order to finally force a peace treaty out of them. I think that just about all our soldiers in this war also think this war is bothersome and tiring as well.

...I'm no longer mad at Mefuri who's completely surrendered herself to me now, but to the enemy country of Densel that sent children to Arxia as living bombs, making Claudia receive terrible injuries in that underground tunnel battle, Densel definitely makes my blood boil. Although I do realize that their ordinary citizens probably had no part in all of this.

"Eliza, after setting fire to Eris, and making sure the enemy knows you're the one who did it, you're to move immediately to Fort Drofy. Meanwhile, the other three fake Earl Kaldias will continue spreading chaos and terror in Eris. When you reach the battlefield at the Tave River, that should be right when the enemy will find out there's something going on at Eris..."

"And so my appearance at the Tave River will send the enemy into even further chaos, is that it?"

"I'm sure that their fear will be multiplied several times over, I'm looking forward to it. Now then, about attacking their navy..."

As Wiegraf continued speaking while grinning, he turned to look at Mefuri for the first time who was sitting obediently in the room with us.

"So that you won't be bothered with too much work to do after the war, I'm going to have to trouble you with a lot to do for the time being. You should at least work off the costs it'll take to repair all the walls you destroyed, don't you think?"

As Wiegraf tilted his head slightly, Mefuri nodded silently a few times in affirmation.



Of course, draconis have characteristics similar to wolves, as they're wolf dragons. For instance, they seem to have endless amounts of stamina, almost as if they don't know fatigue.

...But I could only smile wryly as Vedwoka was the only one who could do such a thing,

so I took a small nap on her back as I arrived at Fort Drofy by myself while Vedwoka flew high enough that we would go unnoticed by anyone on the ground.

Until the signal to begin the next part of our attack, I'm to wait at Fort Drofy. We're waiting for the message from Wiegraf that the enemy's realized I was behind the attack on Eris, and meanwhile I met up with my Kaldia army that had also arrived at Fort Drofy while I was burning the city of Eris and replenished my energy with some food.

After I quietly asked about Claudia and Mefuri's conditions, and updated myself on the latest reports on the combat situation, I was surrounded by my own soldiers that had been with me for so long as soon as I went to the dining hall.

Everyone was calling me Charlie for some reason like the old days, and as if I was still a novice apprentice soldier, they tried to stuff me with food as if I still needed them to look out for me. Even the members that weren't from my army seemed to be addressing me as Charlie instead of Earl Kaldia.

"Hey, eat this as well, Charlie."

"...No, I'm fine. If I eat anymore, I'm going to have a stomachache before battle."

"What are you saying, you used to eat anything and everything you could get your hands on in order to not starve! How could you get a stomachache!"

"This is a different matter, about my stomach's capacity."

While making pointless idle chatter with the my soldiers that have increased in number over the years, I thought about how I hadn't chatted with them like this for several years.

It's still similar to my bantering with Teomer and Gunther, but I hardly ever talk to the normal members of the cavalry and infantry squadrons these days. ...And as for the newer members of my army, they've probably never even had a chance to talk to me.

I felt a sense of nostalgia almost as if I was a novice soldier back in the barracks again. Through that nostalgia, there was also a throbbing sense of pain.

This atmosphere reminds me of the days when Kamil was still with me.

I'm going to use this pain of mine just like the oil on the sawdust from earlier.

It's just perfect for right before battle.

CHAPTER 195

THE BATTLE OF TAVE RIVERSIDE, PART 1

The Rindarl soldiers surrounding Fort Droyan seem to have finally noticed that there was something different about the color of dawn in the direction of Eris today. A report just came in for us now that it's morning that there seems to be a commotion in the enemy army on the other side of the Tave River.

Well, of course. This much is only natural.

After all, the Rindarl army was making use of a large number of slave soldiers. The enemy was making use of slave soldiers as literal meat shields, filling the moat with them, as well as forcing them to be the first to climb over the fort walls using ladders. The slave soldiers would have almost zero morale to begin with, and if the Rindarl soldiers controlling them fell into disorder, it would greatly shake their entire army's chain of command.

It seems that there's already a large number of slave soldiers that are escaping and surrendering to Arxia, so it should only be a matter of time for us to break the enemy's encirclement of Fort Droyan.

It's clear that the enemy armies across the Tave River from us are being commanded by nobles from Densel for the army and Parmigran for the navy. Although our forces at Fort Droyan are fewer, they're skilled at archery and swordsmanship, and they've been holding out the best they can with the terrain advantages that come from fighting a defensive battle.

Rindarl's main strategy seems to be focusing on keeping Fort Droyan suppressed so that they can move the bulk of their main forces across the Tave River, using Eris as their main base to launch attacks from.

Wiegraf observed that their intention was most likely to shift enough soldiers for their attack on Fort Droyan to keep up a constant attack, day and night, fatiguing our soldiers there and keeping them suppressed. It should also be clear to the enemy that Arxia's soldiers' morale has declined as well due to having to constantly be in a state of war on the frontlines for the past eight months.

From the standpoint of crushing the enemy's strategy, ambushing Eris which basically served as their logistical supply base would have the absolute best effect. Next, we're going to aim for the enemy's confusion upon hearing the news and crush their navy on the Tave River. If we succeed, that will deal a fatal blow to the Densel forces.

...It takes time and money to build navy ships. It also takes quite a considerable amount of time to train personnel to crew their ships. And, the ships and personnel are from Parmigran.

Before commencing my attack, I received a personal message from General Commander Rolentsor stationed at Fort Drofy through a red messenger pigeon.

It basically said: "annihilate the enemy on the Tave River. Destroy all their ships. Make the Tave River flow red with their blood."

I couldn't help but exclaim out loud how dangerous this all sounded, which caused Mefuri who was waiting by my side to glance at me.



We commenced our attack as soon as we confirmed the enemy was in confusion from receiving the news about Eris so as to not miss our opportunity.

Once again, I'm separating from my Kaldia army, and heading for the embankments of the Tave River with only Rashiok and Vedwoka. My rank in this battle will be as a guest commanding officer under Ergnade who's also leading his Jugfena knights from Fort Droitros in order to join this attack.

When the horn blew to signal the start of our attack, our knights that were organized into their formations charged the enemy troops that were waiting for us by the edge of the Tave River. According to reports from our previous fights with them, whenever we approached the Tave River, three ships would appear soon and begin firing their "short-tubed fire arrows" (guns) and normal arrows at us.

As soon as we confirmed their ships' arrival and that they were equipped with those "short-tubed fire arrows," our knights began running sideways while shielding themselves.

"Rashiok, let's go! It's our turn!"

The Jugfena knights made a path for me and my draconis in their formation. As Rashiok and Vedwoka rushed through the path and jumped out from the front row, I heard a huge uproar from the enemy army.

The incoming projectiles of bullets and arrows that almost immediately rained down upon us were all blown away by the wind magic of the two draconis. The strong gusts blowing in from the side seemed effective enough to even neutralize the bullets of their primitive guns.

...It seems that Vedwoka's wind magic is even stronger than Rashiok's from before he lost one of his wings. It's a little regrettable that Vedwoka can't understand complex orders like Rashiok can, nor will she allow anyone else other than me to ride on her. Unfortunately, I didn't have enough time to raise and train her for such purposes.

"It, it's Kaldia! It's Kaldia of the crimson eyes!! It's the dragon-riding monster who drinks blood and eats human flesh!!"

A draconis would naturally draw attention in the midst of our warhorses. Especially all the more so that we were charging at them.

Rather than approaching the Rindarl army's dense formation of spears that was waiting for me, I had the two draconis suddenly make a sharp change of direction. Since the enemy here is composed of only infantry and archers, it's quite easy for us to flank them and charge them from the side with the high speed and maneuverability of the draconis.

"Devour them, Rashiok! It's hunting time!!"

In response to my voice, both draconis howled. The enemy was clearly taken off guard by our speed, and unable to change direction quickly enough, they collapsed under our attack as screams rose around us.

Rashiok dexterously avoided the enemy spears as he forced himself into their formation. Bracing myself for impact, I didn't even have to swing around my heavy halberd as I used the momentum from Rashiok's charge to slice through everything in my way.

Rashiok's huge body was also capable of crushing several people under him at once, and desperate screams resounded every time that Rashiok jumped up then crushed

more enemy soldiers under him anew.

Now that the enemy was in total chaos, the Jugfena knights took this opportunity to refresh their attack. They took advantage of being on horseback to have their warhorses trample over Rindarl soldiers, breaking bones in the process. Other enemies would be speared to death, and a mountain of enemy corpses instantly started piling up.

“Ahhhhh!!”

Even in such a situation, of course there were still enemies that were able to calmly try attacking me with their spears or swords, but there was too much of a difference between the reach of my halberd and their weapons. Combined with Rashiok’s speed, I was able to easily crush enemy skulls with a force not possible by human hands alone.

Splitter splatter, blood was gushing out everywhere almost as if it was grape juice, sending the enemy soldiers closest to me into an even more terrified frenzy.

And so, just like that, the two draconis and I successfully passed through the enemy’s army.

CHAPTER 196

THE BATTLE OF TAVE RIVERSIDE, PART 2

It's now past sunset, and night has fallen upon both sides' camps on the Tave River. Tonight, the moon was conveniently hiding behind the clouds, causing darkness to come earlier than usual.

I was sitting on Vedwoka's back, gently opening and closing my right hand as I watched my lightly equipped Kaldia army head downstream for Fort Droitros from Fort Droidas. I seem to have overexerted myself using my halberd earlier in the day using the aid of Rashiok's momentum. I returned to Fort Droidas after that battle, and noticed that my wrist was throbbing. I must have strained it slightly.

Although that may be the case, it's not at the extent where I can't move my hand, so I'm going to have to go back on the battlefield just like this. Well, unlike during the daytime, this time there's no substitutes that can take my place. After all, I'm supposed to be the commander of the Kaldia army.

...For the past several years, my soldiers have been involved in the construction of the village for Kaldia's new citizens, as well as my new mansion that's become the new center of Kaldia domain. Considering that I've been on guard against the possibility of war with Rindarl, my army's swelled up to a size that's disproportionate for the small domain that Kaldia is. Kaldia domain remains a poor one though, and I can't afford to keep an army that doesn't work for its pay. Until we have sufficient food resources to abolish the longstanding tradition of going out to forage for your own food at night, all our resources must be put into development and agriculture so as to prevent my budget going into the red.

And to be honest, the members of the Kaldia army are more skilled with hoes and axes than swords and spears, but at least almost all of them have experience working with rivers. They often go to the lakes and streams, searching for food through fishing and other means.

Wiegraf already seems to have taken their experience in the water into account. My Kaldia army's numbers are probably just right for carrying out this secret operation we're about to do next.

...By the way, the secret operation to ambush the enemy's ships was why my Kaldia army has switched to saws and axes from their swords and spears.

My Kaldia army stopped a little ways from their navy's position, and six excellent swimmers from my army began slowly approaching their six large ships by swimming through the Tave River.

The enemy's huge ships belong to the country of Parmigran. They were towing along some smaller ships with infantry soldiers on them. The big ships appeared to be acting as a logistical supply station for food, arrows, and ammunition.

For Rindarl, or perhaps I should say for the Densel Dukedom, they don't seem to have any more forces other than what we already knew about. As evidence, these ships of theirs didn't head downstream even though the battle turned disadvantageous for them.

They're probably in the situation of having to wait for their soldiers in Eris to recover and head out. The Densel nobles leading their troops from the ships are probably desperately trying to get prepared for tomorrow morning.

I saw that my soldiers had reached the bows of the enemy's large ships. Each of them swung their axes around several times, waiting for my signal. I also signaled for them to wait with my sword, and waited for a signal from Fort Droidas.

“...It's almost time. Mefuri, how are you feeling?”

When I asked Mefuri who was sitting in front of me, she only responded by nodding with a frightened expression on her face.

“Don't make such a scared face. Tonight will be your glorious first battle on the Arxian side.”

Mefuri nodded again. However, her expression remained tense. She's probably afraid of her betrayal being discovered by Rindarl. In any case, she's currently at a turning point in her life she won't be able to go back from.

“Take your mind off it by thinking of something else. That's right, how was today's food? We're on the battlefield, so provisions are a bit rough, but I think it didn't taste all that bad. The amount wasn't much though, but that can't be helped.”

"It, it was amazing, yeah. Also, eating so much, it, it was the first time for me."

"Is that so? -Ahh, I see. ...I don't know what type of person was looking after you before, but now I know that he was a bastard that didn't give you children proper meals. Listen up, Mefuri. What you just ate was nothing more than coarse grains. Without a doubt, the food situation in my domain is the worst in all of Arxia, but it's vastly improved over the past few years thanks to my constant efforts in improving the situation."

I made sure to add plenty of compassion to my voice, as if I was saying 'I would never allow any country to do that to you ever again.' Mefuri's eyes began to well up with emotions.

"You've seen my soldiers already, right? What do you think about their equipment? You can tell that it's much poorer in comparison with the other knights. My domain is a poor one. However, it definitely should be a much better standard of living than whatever your old life was like. As proof, do you see a single soldier of mine that's skinny to the point of being malnourished?"

As I used a calculated emotional appeal to firmly bring her over to my side, Mefuri's face began distorting as if she was about to cry. I wondered if she was remembering back to some painful memory, since her shoulders were trembling.

While stroking Mefuri's back, I confirmed that the lighthouse at Fort Droidas was lit up. This was the first signal.

"...Alright, Mefuri. It's time to use your power. Vent your anger on those that used you like an animal. Be reborn as an Arxian and a believer of the Xia sect, and bring Misorua's judgement down upon those that would take from others."

I feel almost as if I'm playing the part of a demon who's trying to deceive a child, but well, in my opinion, Rindarl was definitely the side that was in the wrong.

The wind brought sounds of a commotion's beginning to me. The Arxian infantry suddenly began their assault on the enemy's small fleet.

The countless torches they held illuminated the night and revealed the blood that was still on the ground from the earlier battle.

Rindarl obviously noticed Arxia's assault beginning, and their ships that had remained quiet up until now suddenly became bustling with noise.

Their commanders' panicked voices overlapped with the sounds of their soldiers getting off the ships. I had been waiting for this opportunity, so I signaled my soldiers waiting near their ships' bows to begin.

They were equipped with hand axes. Of course, such a weapon would be unable to break through the ships' hulls. It would surely take a long time for them to make a large hole in any ship's hull in an unstable environment like the water.

But, a hand axe was more than sufficient to make a tiny dent or hole in which to place something in.

After my soldiers returned to me and confirmed that they all successfully placed their objects, I incited Mefuri to truly commit her first act of betrayal.

"Do it, Mefuri. Bid farewell to Rindarl!"

"...Ah, ahh, ahhh, ahhhhhhhhh!!!"

A loud voice filled with despair and anger rang out from her throat.

It sounded as if she was trying to shake off the fear and hesitation at betraying her home country.

It sounded as if she was venting the anger and frustration from her heart that she couldn't form into words.

Pop, I heard that eerie sound once more from the water, as the six ships' bows were grandly blown away in simultaneous explosions.

"Go, my army!! We have direct orders from the General Commander of Arxia! Annihilate the enemy on the Tave River! Destroy all their ships! Make the Tave River run red with their blood!!!"

CHAPTER 197

THE FIRE RIVER STRATEGEM

The scene was such that I couldn't find any words to describe it other than one: trampling.

Screams and roars of rage mixed in with the sounds of battle. Even though this was a battlefield, sounds of crying and begging for help pierced through the skies.

The Arxia army mercilessly slaughtered all Rindarl soldiers camped on the riverside, regardless of whether the enemy was armed. Of course, the Fort Jugfena knights led the charge.

Just like earlier this morning, the royal army followed behind the Jugfena knights and trampled over everything remaining. It seemed almost as if we were working on cultivating a field for agriculture.

By the way, the situation where I was resembled that of what was happening on the riverside. After blowing sizable holes in the enemy ships with Mefuri's power, I took the opportunity to personally attack the enemy ships, vandalizing and destroying everything I could on their ships. I either killed those that were too late in escaping from me, or knocked them into the river. Once I rampaged enough on a ship so that it was no more than a wreck that couldn't even float, I would move on to the next one and repeat the process.

Once I completely destroyed all six enemy ships, I left the river and went upstream.

“Alright, start pouring.”

“Yes!”

Wiegraf's large-scale battle plan didn't end with the mere destruction of the enemy ships. We poured all our prepared materials into the river. Due to a difference in density, the liquid soon coated itself over the entire river. Oh, just to clarify, we poured flammable oil onto the river.

We quickly dismantled all the barrels to allow the oil to pour as fast as possible into the river, and thus our preparations were complete.

“It’s finished? Everyone, get back then. Fire arrows, release!!”

The soldiers aimed for the broken barrel pieces floating in the river. The Kaldia army had no training whatsoever for shooting at moving targets on a flowing river, but some of the better archers among them were able to hit at least a few of the targets.

After the fire was ignited successfully on the barrel pieces, it quickly spread over the coating of oil on the entire river and bathed the river in fire.

This was only to be expected. For my soldiers who had never witnessed the sight of fire burning on top of water before, I could hear them exclaiming shouts of “wow!” and “amazing!” despite the fact that we were still on the battlefield.

...Following this, the remainder of the battle in the night was absolutely one-sided.

The enemy ships that were already mostly rubble burned into nothing but ashes. The few remaining survivors of the Rindarl army that weren’t able to escape were all throwing down their weapons and waving white flags.

They’ve completely lost all will to battle. Even for the damned Rindarl army that’s so persistent in not surrendering, I suppose that this battle where they were backed up against a burning river and lost almost everything was too much for them.

By the way, I could hear cheers from the Arxian army shouting “we have the divine protection of the god Misorua!” all around me. My soldiers were finally celebrating.

“We’ve won! With this, the war will finally be over! We can carry our victorious lord home on our shoulders!”

Agil who was standing next to me kept shouting jubilantly as if he wasn’t feeling any fatigue at all from the constant battling today all morning and all night.

...Personally though, I don’t think I contributed all that much to this battle or the conclusion of the war if it happens. My soldiers were enjoying the pleasure of victory right now though, so I kept silent and let them have their fun.

After all, this battle's entire strategy was overseen by Wiegraf, and he prepared everything necessary for it. While I may have carried out his strategy successfully without inconveniencing him, my soldiers were the ones who did most of the grunt work.

Although this war caused me to become infamous, I doubt it would actually influence the outcome of the overall war. It's only to the extent of making me into a more useful chess piece and increasing the number of tactics we can use.

Even if I wasn't present at this battle, I think that Egnade and the Jugfena knights are far more frightening than I am, and even Marquis Rolentsor and his personal knights participated in this battle. The pressure and fear that the enemy felt probably would have been the same.

...Well, to be honest, I think I do feel just slightly relieved as well.

I knew that I had probably gone somewhat overboard. I shall never forget my fear of losing my humanity, no matter how long I end up living.

However, as I thought about my original goal of "ending the war" I still felt a sense of refreshment at witnessing the Densel troops finally being completely broken of their will to fight anymore.

Although, I knew that I was already 80% similar to the enemy as it currently stood.

"Shall we return to Fort Droidas now, Milord?"

Calvin who was leading a unit to protect our extra supply of oil barrels in case we needed them asked me in a soft voice.

"Ahh, sure." I nodded in response as I stroked Vedwoka's neck as a reward for her patience with all my soldiers around her. I felt like I might as well walk together with my soldiers for a change, so I was about to dismount from her.

At least, that had been my intention.

But suddenly, Vedwoka's body that had been relaxed suddenly filled with tension as she snapped her silvery-white snake-like tail back to her body, causing my entire field of vision to be massively shaken. The next thing I knew, Vedwoka had suddenly flown

up and away from this location.

“Eek!”

Vedwoka’s movements were so sudden that I was unable to figure out the draconis’s intentions. Mefuri who was still sitting behind me shrieked as she clung on to Vedwoka’s neck.

Something huge entered my field of vision, flying at a tremendous pace straight for the place where Vedwoka and I had just been.

Ahh, so she was trying to avoid that – I realized that through the headache I had from being shaken around so unexpectedly.

“Agil!! Calvin!!”

That’s when I realized that “the huge something” landed right next to their feet.

A sonorous birdsong rang out, its elegance and melodiousness seeming terribly out of place on the battlefield.

A mysterious and beautiful giant golden bird had arrived here – that was all that my confused and battered mind was able to comprehend.

CHAPTER 198

SIDE STORY: ON A CERTAIN DAY, PART 1

Author note: Here's a celebration POV chapter for having reached 200 chapters! (Cast of Characters and Glossary count as chapters in the Japanese raw.) This story has continued for such a long time successfully! The second half to this chapter shall be at Chapter 250. Well, this story doesn't have too much relationship to the main storyline. I hope that you all will be able to enjoy it anyways. Please wait for the conclusion of the extra chapter!

Earl Siegmund Terejia's POV (80 years old)

TL note: remember that Earl Terejia's older brother is the prime minister of Arxia. Earl Terejia is currently having a dream about 60+ years in the past, in his childhood.

Today's the day that my older brother Radian Terejia is supposed to visit my residence instead of staying at the House of Lords like he typically does. Normally my residence had a quiet atmosphere; only today was my residence lively and bustling.

It wasn't particularly that my older brother liked my servants, but it was something more like he was able to relax and work more efficiently in my residence that had only serious people residing here with nobody interested in "having fun."

Due to my strict upbringing from my late mother, I wasn't able to say anything about it. However, I still minded the fact that there was a commotion from my servants during my typical free time that I used for reading books.

Of course, those serving the Terejia family would never cause a commotion during work. If anyone was to take a walk in my residence, they wouldn't find a single servant engaging in idle chatter at any time.

...However, that didn't change the fact that today, I could hear muffled voices coming from all over.

I let out a sigh as I closed my book. While it was a sign of my immaturity even at my age to be distracted by sounds, I had no choice but to give up on reading since I was unable to concentrate no matter how hard I focused.

Apart from reading, the only other activities I typically do are walking around my garden or studying. I really dislike wasting my time idly, but today I've been sitting for so long at my desk while accomplishing nothing. Perhaps it would be better if I move my body around in an effort to improve my mood.

Thinking so, I saw a dizzying sight as soon as I entered my garden. Someone was in it already, having a one-person tea party act.

Well, for a moment I tried to pretend like she didn't exist, but she called out towards me saying "greetings, am I bothering you?" It was impossible to ignore.

"...What's with that, saying greetings."

I couldn't help but let my displeasure seep into my voice. Despite this, the person in question tilted her head slightly with a smile as if she was about to eat someone, saying "hmm? I don't seem to be welcome. Have I done something?"

She was acting so casual.

"First, remember that this is supposed to be my residence. Second, right now it's still quite early in the morning. Third, I recall that you were supposed to be present at my older brother welcoming at the noble school. ...Why are you here, Amanda?"

Although I had a slightly irritated tone of voice, this childhood friend of mine definitely acted her teenager age as she completely ignored my attitude and casually stated "well, how about taking a seat for the time being?" as she gestured towards an empty chair with her chin.

This was just how she was, she wouldn't have a proper conversation with you unless you were sitting across the table from her. As soon as I sat down together with my long-time acquaintance, she began pouring tea for me as if she was one of my maids. I didn't feel like relaxing at all, however.

"And so? About my older brother's welcoming?"

My older brother's welcoming should have been scheduled to be right in front of the noble school. It's still possible to make it on time if she leaves right now, but I felt it was unreasonable for me to have to worry about whether or not she'll manage to be there on time.

After all, she herself didn't appear to be any hurry. She was simply drinking tea so nonchalantly.

"Amanda. You're my older brother's fiancée. Why is it that..."

Even though I put as much of a criticizing tone into my voice as I possibly could, Amanda didn't even raise her eyebrows while smiling towards me mysteriously.

She wasn't looking at me, she was watching me.

Amanda had the bad habit of looking at others as if she could see through them. Most people – including my older brother that was engaged to her – found this creepy. ...Well, Amanda and I have tried to point out and fix each other's bad habits, but no matter what I said, she never seemed to do anything about or understand why this habit of hers was a bad one.

"Just exactly what are you thinking?"

Not knowing what she was thinking, I could only swallow down my apprehension as I averted my gaze from Amanda's eyes.

At any rate... It was useless for me to do anything about her.

-Honestly, I'm always so useless at everything important.

I was always someone who could hear all the noise around me, but for this person I didn't care for, I couldn't see beyond her outer appearance. Although I say that, this childhood friend of mine is also someone who completely can't read the atmosphere.

"...Ahh, I can hear so much today..."

Amanda finally opened her mouth with a distorted smile filled with fatigue and her tone of voice seemed pitying.

I glared back at her. She was the only one I didn't want pity from. I wouldn't allow it.

She seemed momentarily surprised by my glare, but the next instant an amused smile appeared on her face.

I sharpened my glare even more. This was in extremely bad taste, being amused at someone feeling uncomfortable.

"No, that's not it. I was amused at your thoughts."

"...I don't get what the difference is supposed to be."

"Well, it seems that you believe they're the same. However, there's a huge difference to me."

My childhood friend was strangely mature, and she often spoke in a roundabout method used mostly by adults. While I wasn't put off by it, I wasn't interested in her way of speaking either. As for why she became like this, I have no idea.

Although, perhaps I was the one who empathized and understood her the most.

"As for Radian, don't worry about it. Marquis Terejia himself told me that greetings would be unnecessary."

While saying so, Amanda picked up a baked pastry from the dish in front of her.

"What? Have the plans changed? I didn't hear about that... Still, even if this is your fiancé's home, I think it's considered a problem for you to be indulging yourself here so early in the morning."

"Heh heh, what's done is done. Besides, this is the last year. Starting next year, we'll be noble school students as well."

She deftly split the baked pastry with her fingers. "You want one?" I took the pastry half she offered to me with an indescribable feeling.

Next year will be noble school. – Come to think of it, that means that we won't be able to have tea like this anymore with just the two of us. Starting from next year, only my older brother will be allowed to do this.

I'm perfectly aware that right now this was only implicitly permitted due to the facts that I'm her fiancé's younger brother, that we were both still minors, and that no outside prying eyes were here at the Terejia residence.

...Originally speaking, even sharing sweets with her like this wasn't something that we were supposed to do. But thinking that I could only do something like this now, I couldn't help but accept the sweet that my childhood friend offered me.

I heard a chuckle from Amanda at this. I only saw her smile for a brief instant, even though she involuntarily let it out because of me. I could only give her a sidelong glance at this.



Suddenly, I jolted awake. As expected, the familiar figure of my childhood friend dressed in white priestly attire was beside my bed.

“...Amanda...?”

“You’re awake?”

I gave a sigh at hearing how weak the voice that replied to mine sounded.

Although we’re the same age, I have to take a nap like this every day to have energy through the evening. I can’t compare to her who’s still so energetically coming to visit my residence like it’s her own all the way from the temple.

“I came to visit you. I’m more relieved than I thought I would be, since you seem so energetic, Siegmund. I had thought that you were nearly bedridden.”

“It was just for a mere ten days, not a big deal. Besides, if you visit me so frequently, everyone will think that I’m nearing my deathbed soon.”

“Aren’t the Terejia family servants quite excellent in doing their work?”

My childhood friend chuckled familiarly while saying something so bothersome. She still seemed indescribably young as if time had stopped for her, but when she smiled like that, wrinkles still emerged.

She sniffed her nose at letting out that unexpected comment coming from her.

“Isn’t it in bad taste to be amused at a woman’s wrinkles?”

“Ah, yeah. That’s right. My bad.”

“...Heh heh, no, I was just joking. Somehow, things felt rather nostalgic. You used to say that name so often in the past in your mind. ...Amanda, wow. That’s quite an old name I haven’t used for decades, what you were calling me just now.

She seemed to have a distant look on her face. I wonder if she was reminiscing about the past.

Thinking back to the dream I just had about our childhood when she was still Amanda, I muttered that just about everyone would have twinges of nostalgia when reaching senior citizen age.

“That’s just the nature of elderly people.”

She seemed to be rather happy as she sniffed and the wrinkles on her face appeared again with her smile.

Although she just joked with me that it was in bad taste, but truthfully, I still felt that it was a good thing that my childhood friend still showed at least some signs of aging.

TL note: This chapter doesn’t state it specifically, but all the clues, especially the ability to read minds, point to the fact that Amanda most likely equals Priest Faris. Meanwhile, the otome game arc has finally officially begun in chapter 220 of the raws for those of you who have been waiting! The next chapter goes back to the battlefield with Eliza and the mysterious golden bird.

CHAPTER 199

THIS WASN'T SUPPOSED TO BE A BATTLE AGAINST A MAGICAL BEAST!

Vedwoka was roaring in an effort to intimidate the golden bird. She also whipped up a painful gust of wind that was slightly too strong for my body to handle, but the majestic beast ignored it with an unruffled expression.

"-Kaldia army, keep your distance! Help anyone near you that's injured! But, don't approach too close to that large bird even to rescue anyone!!"

In order to stop myself from panicking, I shouted orders in as loud of a voice as I could possibly muster. My soldiers that were just as shocked as I was at the huge bird's sudden appearance regained their senses at hearing my shout and obeyed my orders to keep their distance from the golden bird.

Despite me telling them that they shouldn't get close to the bird, they were still dragging and carrying away the soldiers that had lost consciousness for various reasons who were closest to the giant bird. Well, the rescuers were the ones who weren't affected too much by the bird's descent, and I suppose it wasn't **too** close in proximity to the giant bird.

"Injured soldiers retreat first! Archers, prepare for combat! ...Rashiok! Please help me protect everyone!!"

The first thing on my mind was to prepare for in case this golden bird was an enemy. For such a gigantic bird, the only soldiers in my army that would be able to do combat with it are those equipped with long-distance weapons, my archers.

Following my orders, my soldiers quickly ran for the nearby trees' cover. The golden bird merely tilted its head and watched them disinterestedly.

I wonder if the golden bird didn't chase the small humans moving around it as it descended due to its bulkiness. Its physical structure didn't seem suited for chasing smaller prey like us humans. Or was it that it simply wasn't interested in the soldiers?

However, once Rashiok went out with his one wing spread out protectively to cover the soldiers, the golden bird was no longer able to ignore him and Vedwoka who was still roaring intimidatingly. The golden bird screeched piercingly as well.

This seems almost like a battle between magical beasts. Although I knew that this wasn't the time or place to be thinking such a thing, I couldn't stop myself from thinking this as I straddled Vedwoka.

...That's why I was so relieved in spite of the situation when I heard someone speak up from where she was sitting on the golden bird.

"Calm down, this is just my pet. I didn't come here to be your opponent."

The voice sounded rather melodious. Although her voice seemed calm as well while telling us to calm down, the mysterious part was how her voice managed to transmit its way across this great distance.

On the golden bird's back between its wings, I saw a speck of gray with green mixed in at the top.

She was slightly older than me... I think this girl was around 18 years old or so. She was wearing light-colored church clothing like a church sister would, seeming completely out of place on this battlefield. She was looking all around her, but she stopped and smiled when she fixed her line of sight on me.

A chill ran down my spine.

At first glance, she seemed to be smiling calmly and gently. However, I also saw enjoyment of other people's suffering there – this expression is one I know far too well, no matter how much I detest it.

I think it's the expression I hate more than any other in this world. If only I hadn't gained so much experience with this expression right after I was born... more accurately, I wish this type of emotion didn't even exist in this world in the first place.

"...If it was up to me, I'd really like to kill you here and now, but I shouldn't. I've come for a different purpose today, you see."

It almost seemed like she was talking to herself as she looked down at me with a cruel

look in her eyes. She then looked slightly adjacent to me, at Mefuri who was currently clutching on to me.

The mysterious girl's expression changed to one of utter coldness and contempt.

I heard the sound of Mefuri whimpering from behind me and felt her trembling in fear.

"Archers, fire!!"

Well, no matter what this girl said, it didn't change the fact that she appeared to be an enemy.

Even if her aim was just Mefuri, it didn't change the fact that she nonchalantly scattered so many of my soldiers around like they were bowling pins.

Although she speaks the Arxian language, and there's still too many unexplained things like how she came to be here, I won't show mercy to anyone that came to this battlefield which was no place for civilians.

In accordance with my order, multiple arrows released everywhere from the surrounding woods, all aiming for the golden bird.

...However, the golden bird shot out several of its feathers, and knocked all the arrows away.

"Useless. Human weapons won't work on my pet here. That's why you should just obediently hand the traitor over to me."

The girl didn't change her gently smiling expression and pointed straight at Mefuri as if she was saying "alright?"

I responded with nothing but silence. I didn't feel like getting angry at this girl who had the power to cause Mefuri to tremble in such fear, nor did I feel negotiating with this girl who had basically invaded my army by herself.

-This situation gave me the same feeling as when Melchior Nordsturm, who stunningly resembled me so much, appeared in front of me several years ago and claimed to be a living relative of mine. A warning was ringing in my mind to ignore any words that this girl said and to kill her as soon as possible.

“...I find it difficult to imagine that there will be a good outcome for you if you try to protect that girl...”

“There’s no helping it.” The girl seemed to say that to herself.

At that moment.

The golden bird looked up at the sky and screeched again, but the next thing that happened was difficult for me to comprehend. Black clouds instantly appeared in the clear sky, and a lightning strike came down straight for Rashiok.

CHAPTER 200

DIVINE BIRD

When the white streak hit Rashiok, he screeched loudly in pain as if he had been hit by a gunshot.

I was unable to make a single sound.

I was in shock as if the world around me had stopped moving, like I'd received a blow to my own head.

Even though I didn't intend to believe in the Xia Church, did this count as evidence that I'd begun accepting their teachings?

In this world, the thunder from the skies was supposed to be something only the "gods" could control.

For an enemy giant bird to be able to control it was difficult for me to accept. My head felt like it was going numb.

"Rashi..."

I heard the sound of something rattling. What was this continuous irregular clacking noise? I reached out to touch my own face for the source.

That's when I finally realized. I was trembling with such severity. This sound had been coming from my upper and lower teeth constantly gnashing against each other. ...Compared to where I was touching my face, my hand was actually trembling less.

"Have you changed your mind now?"

The enemy girl's calm voice seemed to envelop the entire area. I began breaking out into a cold sweat.

I stubbornly stopped myself from looking down at Mefuri who was in my arms. If I did, I felt as if I would perhaps release her to the enemy.

But no matter how much I worked my head, I couldn't come up with a good idea on how to get out of this situation without handing Mefuri over.

No, it was likely possible that if it was only me and Mefuri, that we would be able to escape, but I wasn't willing to make such a sacrifice of my soldiers just for Mefuri's sake.

I kept opening and closing my mouth meaninglessly.

Mefuri was now looking back up at me.

...Then, I came to the sudden realization that she had already been touching both me and Vedwoka for almost half a day already. My unsightly impatient expression met Mefuri's currently blank eyes.

"Or perhaps it'll be quicker if I just burn everyone here, including you. What should I do? Do you want to stay by this child's side? If not, could you please kill her personally for me? There's no need for the light of this child's life anymore in this world, you know?"

The enemy girl was saying that so lightly almost as if she was singing.

I took a deep gulp.

Die. Only the conviction that I wanted the enemy girl to die was whirling around inside my mind like a tornado.

Was I going to have to sacrifice Mefuri?

I felt as if my mouth was going completely dry.

But, abandoning Mefuri wasn't an option. The moment I said something like that, there was the possibility of her blowing me up.

I myself was the one who inflated and encouraged Mefuri's "fear of being abandoned" in order to get Mefuri onto my side. How ironic that I myself had no path of retreat thanks to my own tactic.

It seemed as if I had only the two choices of keeping my word to Mefuri and protecting

her while risking being struck to death by lightning from that giant bird, or breaking my promise to Mefuri to never abandon her and most likely end up getting exploded by her.

However, no matter what, I had no intentions of dying here.

It was as if I heard a tiny voice whispering into my ears. ‘-I like you as well. I don’t want to kill you. That’s why, no matter what happens, live. Do not die, I will never allow such a thing-’

It was a curse.

...Or perhaps it could also be called a promise that hurt my chest to the point where I thought I would have a heart attack.

From my stomach and below, I felt so hot as if I was boiling, yet my head remained perfectly cool and colder than ice.

Although this mixed sense of icy and burning rage wasn’t new to me, somehow my brain was working even better than it normally would at this point in time. There was just one thing I had to do.

“...Mefuri. I have a question for you. You-”

I averted my gaze from the girl gazing at us with a sarcastic taunting expression and whispered my question to Mefuri in a low voice only we could hear.

Mefuri opened her eyes wide in surprise at my question. Finally, she nodded almost imperceptibly.

I let go of a huge sigh as I placed my hand on her shoulder. At the same time, I slowly withdrew my short sword from the scabbard on my waist.

I saw the girl on the huge bird narrow her eyes joyously as she looked in our direction.

I met her gaze, and glared viciously in return – and had Vedwoka suddenly jump up into the air.

“...Eh?”

The girl didn't even have time to react with anything other than an expression of shock to the supple draconis flying up instantly with a powerful jump.

I kept rising and rising. For just a split second, I met the girl's glance at the exact same eye level, before I passed her swiftly by in height.

My blood-red eyes were so similar to the color of sunset during dusk. Just like during the battle where I set fire to an entire river, I currently had an expression similar to my deceased father's.

I sliced my short sword horizontally. With a *shing!* sound, I suddenly felt less weight on my head.

I let go of my bundle of tied hair and dropped it towards the giant golden bird.

“Do it, Mefuri!”

Mefuri responded to my order and shouted out murkily in a grating sound that was the exact opposite of the golden bird's sonorous singing.

Pop, I heard the familiar activation sound of her magic.

My hair that I sliced off of myself exploded on top of the giant bird's head.

“Kya!?”

The girl and the giant bird screamed together simultaneously. The giant bird that had suddenly received an unexpected attack to its head flew up to the sky in a frenzy and scattered blood around everywhere.

“Vedwoka, devour!”

Vedwoka matched her altitude with the giant bird that was currently flying around haphazardly in a frenzy. Assisted by the magic power to control the wind that Rashiok formerly possessed as well in the past, Vedwoka dived through the air and sunk her fangs into the giant bird's throat.

“Screech!!”

Everything happened in just an instant. The giant bird violently thrashed its body around, twisting and turning so much that I was extremely jarred as well from the centrifugal forces.

Before we crashed into the ground, Vedwoka righted herself and flew up again, while Mefuri and I did our best simply to hold on.

Although I expected it, the explosion's power was still too small for my satisfaction – probably because I hadn't been in contact with Mefuri for a sufficient amount of time yet. It seemed like we still didn't manage to do enough damage to the giant bird, as it also succeeded in righting itself midair and appeared to finally calm down.

There was no more time for us to escape now.

-Damn it!

"Ha. Ahh, I see. That's how it is. That's your choice, eh. Diapetal, cast divine judgement down upon them!"

The girl's loud voice sounded from above me, and the huge bird crowed once more towards the sky.

It all happened so fast that I had no time to react whatsoever.

My field of vision was filled with a light so bright that I had no idea what was happening to me.

CHAPTER 201

FLOWERLESS FRUIT

...

.....

.....I couldn't see or hear anything.

I couldn't even feel which way was up and which way was down. Nor did I know if I was currently still in the sky or on the ground.

Even in such a state, my senses gradually returned to me, and I noticed that I was collapsed on the ground.

I was painfully lying face-down against the ground.

Not even mentioning the fact that I was ingesting a large amount of dirt and sand, I could only keep my mouth open weakly like a caterpillar's crawl as I breathed into the dirt. It was so difficult to breathe that I felt like I was drowning, even though I wasn't in the water.

Before attempting to breathe again, I finally expelled the remaining air in my lungs, and then somehow managed to start breathing somewhat normally.

I breathed to confirm the situation. If I tried inhaling as much air as my lungs wanted, they would instead expel the air back out of me again.

...It seemed that I wasn't dead after all.

Although my body seemed to be intact even if it was in throbbing pain everywhere, my hands and feet wouldn't obey my orders, and I was unable to lift them.

Had I taken a direct hit from the enemy's lightning? The ground I was collapsed on seemed to have been blown up by the thunderbolt, with the rice plants scattered about everywhere.

“Honestly, this is why I opposed leaving things up to an outsider.”

What?

As if I was submerged in water, the voice sounded fuzzy and distant from me. If it wasn't for the current situation, I probably would have missed it and dismissed it as background noise.

When I dazedly managed to twist my head, I saw some people standing by my side.

There were two people wearing white cloaks. I was unsure as to their identities.

When did they-?

“...What's going on here, I wonder? Why did you get in my way? Wasn't I dealing with this child for you as you wanted?”

I could hear the blurry voice of the enemy girl from earlier who wasn't even trying to conceal her irritation. Unless I concentrated, her voice sounded so distant as if it was just one voice out of many in a crowd.

“It'll trouble us if you damage a valuable Flowerless Fruit simply to deal with a wilting weed. Just imagining the potential loss... Well, since you had your power stolen by demons, it's something you wouldn't understand. Flowerless Fruits are incredibly rare, you see.”

“...Exactly what are you talking about? Flowerless Fruit?”

The girl's voice lowered after hearing something mysteriously difficult to comprehend.

“It's something that the gods have taught us. If you don't know, then that means there's no need for you to know.”

This strangely high-pitched voice seemed to be coming from the other person wearing a white cloak. How passionate the voice sounded in tandem with the strange tone caused goosebumps to run down my flesh.

“Since it's come to this, it's fine to just forget about dealing with the traitor. It would be a waste to damage the Flowerless Fruit's sprouts just to deal with a wilting weed.”

“Exactly what’s going on? Weren’t you guys the ones who wanted me to kill the traitor in the first place?”

“Ahh, ignorance is truly such a frightening thing. Even if we gathered ten rotten seeds that can’t germinate such as yourself, all of you together wouldn’t compare to Flowerless Fruit that has sprouted. Ahh, if only we had known about this Flowerless Fruit’s existence sooner...”

“Guariere, don’t reveal too much information. The Flowerless Fruit is listening. ...Well, even if she listens, she probably wouldn’t understand anything.”

With a swish, one of the two people wearing white cloaks kneeled down beside me and looked into my face. “Red eyes,” the person muttered to him or herself under their hood, and a nasty smile appeared on the person’s face.

Suddenly, there was a sensation of heat as if there was a fire in front of my eyes. The white-cloaked person named Guariere held down my head as a burning sensation entered my body through my nose.

What exactly was this? What was going on? Even though there was clearly no fire, why was there the sensation of fire?

“Stop,” I weakly managed to moan, but the white-cloaked person ignored me. Not only that, the fiery sensation amplified even further in magnitude, causing great anxiety within me as I was unable to escape.

My ears began ringing strongly, and my fear kept increasing at the abnormal situation.

“Get away from Milord!!”

At this moment, I heard voices from afar. Since one of my ears was pressed against the ground, I could feel the trembling in the earth from my soldiers rushing over towards me.

At hearing Rashiok’s rather weakened roar among the hubbub, I let slip a sigh of relief.

“We’ll have to stop now. Guariere, it’s time for us to leave.”

“To be satisfied when I’ve only finished with her face... No, I shall leave things up to

the guidance of my god and my teacher.”

Due to the constant ringing in my ears, I had to strain my utmost to listen in to their conversation.

Far before my soldiers could reach me, I saw the giant bird flying away through my field of vision that was still hazy.

The two white-cloaked people watched the bird fly off, then both glanced down at me. Due to the glare of the sun, I was unable to make out their faces clearly.

“Glory to our god.”

Both of them muttered that in unison with fanatical voices.

And then, suddenly – as if something had gone wrong with my eyes and they were just my imagination – both of them instantly disappeared right in front of me.

CHAPTER 202

END OF BATTLE

“Kaldia!”

In the Kaldia domain, in front of the domain lord’s residence.

I had finally withdrawn from the border together with the royal army’s troops and arrived back home when a voice called out to me. Looking up, I saw Eric who was vigorously waving towards me from a third floor window.

Even though he had only left several days earlier, it felt as if I hadn’t seen him for several months with all that happened.

I reflexively wondered if I should wave back at him, then remembered that I was currently bandaged all over for my injuries, so I barely raised one hand just for the sake of appearances.

In place of me, Rashiok and Vedwoka who were flanking my sides both howled in greeting. I could only smile wryly at the startle it gave the horse I was riding on.

“I’ve returned, Baron Dovadain. My apologies for having left you alone.”

“Honestly! You put me here and went off to the battlefield by yourself, and now you’re coming back all beaten up like this!! Are you an idiot!?” I could only accept his typical insult-filled greeting with a subtle expression.

Eric who came out to greet me first when I entered my mansion was staring at my now shortened hair and arm that was currently in a splint.

It was easy to tell that he was worried in his own way, and I expected that my appearance didn’t seem congruent with the fact that everyone was now in a post-victory mode.

By the way, Ratoka who was acting as “me” while escorting Eric was glancing over at me while mixing in with the other servants in maid attire. Ratoka had pretended to return to the battlefield after escorting Eric here, but secretly stayed behind in order to take charge of Eric’s protection and other needs with Eric never finding out the truth that I hadn’t escorted him to begin with.

“Whoa!? K, Kal, Kaldia! You, your hair...!!”

It seemed that Eric had finally noticed that my hair under my hood had parts of it chopped off and now reached only my shoulders. I only shrugged lightly in response to him who was pointing at my hair with a finger that was trembling.

Arxian nobles, regardless of if they’re male or female, prefer to keep long hair. Although there’s still some teenaged noble boys that prefer to keep short hair, most of them also keep long hair to separate themselves from commoners that would be unable to maintain the upkeep for beautiful long hair.

The royal males and nobles that enter the monastery are typically the only exceptions. Well, I suppose that my shortened hair will be stared at with curious eyes by everyone once I return to noble society. I also felt that it was inconvenient how I was no longer able to tie my hair up as I could before.

Ever since cutting my own hair short, I’d been avoiding mirrors.

...I’m almost the same age now as the “Eliza” from the otome game. I felt a sense of loss at the timing of losing my hair which I kept long and tied up in a ponytail on purpose to differentiate my features from the Eliza in the game as much as possible, even if we had the same face.

However, with my hair this short, I felt now that I didn’t resemble my father as much as before. This was the only good part about losing some hair.



“Well?” Ratoka who was helping me change my bandages tilted his head questioningly.

“...The cartilage in my wrist is cracked. I have injuries and scrapes all over my body. My left ear’s eardrum seems to be torn. For some reason, only my face seems to be fine, so you won’t need any strange injuries for you to continue acting as my double.”

After I finished informing him about my situation, he let out a deep sigh.

I glanced over at his left hand then quickly averted my gaze. There was the trace of an ugly three-year old scar there.

...His scar was at the exact same location as mine. Normally, we both kept our scars hidden with gloves, but his had appeared by itself without me knowing about it. Three years ago, the now deceased Viscount Ogren had stabbed a spear through my left hand, impaling it against the ground and leaving me with a deep injury. Ratoka must have purposefully given himself a similar injury to match mine as my body double without me even requesting it of him.

Ratoka never talked about it, nor have I mentioned it. I felt that there was no need.

I never gave him such a command. But if he gave himself such a wound, I have nothing to say.

“...Well, isn’t that a pity. I wouldn’t exactly have looked forward to injuring myself again if you had injured your face.”

Ratoka had never brought up the topic of injuring himself out of his dedication to me before. I decided to respond to his sarcastic joke with one of my own as thanks.

“Aren’t you happy anyway to be told that you look cute as a maid?”

“No, of course I’m not happy!”

“Ahh, well, I’ve always heard that whenever you take my place, there’s comments like ‘Eliza-sama seems much cuter than usual’ and so on.”

“Shut up, you’re annoying! Stop pointing out what people don’t want to hear!”

At Ratoka’s forceful retort, I suddenly couldn’t help but chuckle. It felt like a heavy weight I had been carrying in my chest was finally beginning to dissipate.

I managed to come back alive – that weight had been from my resolve at possibly facing death on the battlefield.

“Sigh... Anyway, I understand about your injuries now. So, what happened after that?

...Are the captured enemy children prisoners alright?"

The gentle air in the atmosphere gradually started cooling.

Ratoka's eyes held no expectations as he asked me about the children. Nor were there any signs that he had given up on them. I merely saw trust in me at whatever I decided to do to the children I had been chasing after in the tunnels when Ratoka and I separated. I slowly shook my head.

"Four of them died. As for what happened – let me give you a detailed explanation. Ratoka, do you still remember the incident from three years ago?"

"The fire moth incident in the royal capital?"

"Yes. Just like that time, a force beyond human understanding – a person who could use magic just like the magical beasts appeared."

Ratoka remained silent in response to the beginning of my tale.

I told Ratoka everything that happened after we separated. About the fight in the underground passageway, about the war, about the giant bird's attack, and about how the mysterious two people in white cloaks appeared and presumably spared me.

As I told the story, I felt grateful – perhaps I should be grateful to the Xia Church's god, Misorua, that I was still alive to tell the tale.

CHAPTER 203

RETURNING TO NOBLE SCHOOL

For the newly emerged large country known as the Rindarl Union that was only a year and a half old... Well, more technically, it was mostly a war with the Densel Dukedom of the Rindarl Union. Since the Rindarl armies had suffered massive losses on the Tave River, together with the rebellion of their slave soldiers during their attempt to siege Fort Droyan, and the fact that their farthest frontline base as well as Densel's capital Eris suffered a complete loss of all supplies kept there due to fire, Rindarl finally offered their unconditional surrender.

Peace negotiations were still ongoing, and it seemed that my neighbor Margrave Genas' army was in charge of escorting and protecting Arxia's peace ambassador to Densel's capital. Arxia was now already circulating stories of how Rindarl finally understood Arxia's true military might, that it was no joking matter to mess with Arxia.

Since I had to recuperate from my injuries, I returned to the royal capital much later than the royal army did, and returned to the noble school that still appeared the same as before I headed for Fort Jugfena. Anyway, at the school now, just about all the students avoided me even more than before, most likely because of stories they heard from their parents. Well, due to having fought again on the battlefield, stories about my infamous reputation and wicked plots that I used during the war may have spread even further.

Well, all those changes were trivial – such as how my head now felt lighter with less hair than before.

“Kaldia! It seems that Grays and Alfred are returning to school today. It’s been quite a long while since we saw them last, hasn’t it? Don’t you think we should go greet them?”

“.....His Royal Highness and Grays are most likely tired from their civic duties. I’m sure that they would be bothered by our greeting.”

“Nah, rather, if you go, I’m sure that Alfred will be saved from having too many people swarm around him. Let’s go!”

And so, Eric pulled my arm towards the crowd that was already beginning to form.

After Eric returned to noble school and had a few conversations with his father the Archduke, he's remained like this all the time.

Did he misunderstand something and believe us to be friends now? Where did his unwillingness to associate with a low-ranked Earl like myself disappear to?

I thought that Eric wanted me to keep my distance from the crown prince due to my negative reputation, why did it become like this? I only had one long talk with Eric back at Fort Jugfena that I can recall. That was it. Was that the cause? Doesn't this seem like too much of a change?

What's more, Eric was sent off to Fort Jugfena in the first place as a way to punish him for starting that scandal with Sieghart and to distance him and me from national politics. Well, if his relationship with me improved slightly due to it, it was not a problem – that was within my calculations.

But instead, not only was Eric not removed from the crown prince's inner circle, he seems to be acting far more familiar with me than I expected and is even encouraging me to interact with the crown prince now... For a lack of better words to describe it, I felt like I was missing too many pieces of the puzzle.

From what I heard, the rebellion of the enemy slave armies at Fort Droyan seemed to have come about due to the speech Eric ended up giving to the royal army.

After he was touched by visiting the mentally injured soldiers in the makeshift hospital at Fort Jugfena, Eric finally gave the royal army formal permission to attack as well as inspiring and encouraging the knights for their honorable service to Arxia. Due to his speech, the knights at the frontlines of Fort Droyan avoided combat as much as possible with the enemy slave soldiers, and in some cases even actively protected them – which apparently led to the enemy slaves' great rebellion.

And as a result, all the troops at Fort Droyan returned almost unscathed.

Thanks to this being recognized as Eric's accomplishment, while Eric did leave the crown prince's side for a time, Eric ended up performing tasks such as giving inspiring speeches to some of the most powerful knight orders in Arxia, working on veterans' benefits for retired and injured Arxian soldiers, and other such civic duties.

In fact, it could be said that Eric had gotten closer to the center of national politics as well.

I could only smile helplessly at Eric telling this was all thanks to me. I did not plan for it, nor did I expect it.

Why did things become like this? Really, why did things become like this?

But right now, I didn't want to deal with Eric's minor bothering of me. Although I can't say that we were friends just because of this one thing – it was an indisputable fact that I was able to rest peacefully and recuperate from my injuries before coming back to noble school thanks to Eric's assistance.

Since I owed him this favor, I couldn't treat his minor bothering of me as an evil action.

"Alfred! Grays! Ah, Sieghart's here as well!"

Eric pushed his way through the crowd as he dragged me along after him. I could see that the crown prince and Grays had shocked expressions at seeing the two of us. The general commander's grandson, who was most likely here to greet Prince Alfred and Grays, glanced warmly in my direction.

The crown prince was able to quickly return to his usual smile as he greeted me with an "it's been a long time." With that, I no longer had the option of escaping as it would be a breach of etiquette, so I could only greet him in return.

"Your Royal Highness Crown Prince Alfred, and Viscount Dovadain. It has been so long since I've been in the presence of your esteemed selves. I am truly gratified that you are both doing well."

"You as well, Kaldia. I heard that you were quite active in the war against Rindarl. Apparently you suppressed Densel's capital city Eris, and destroyed all the enemy's ships on the Tave River."

"That was all thanks to Earl Wiegraf Einsbark's strategy"

"I also heard that you declined most of the rewards. It does seem like your style, but..."

"...I do not need any increase in noble rank nor additional territory. I would be terribly

troubled to receive such things."

Even the rank of an Earl was too high for my tastes, so I definitely didn't want a promotion. And as for land, I didn't even have enough time or personnel to develop what the Kaldia domain already had, so I wanted land even less. Even if I received such things, they would only be a burden and attract even more envy from other nobles that I wouldn't want. The only thing I wanted was money. Well, personnel as well. And also food supplies, and materials to be used in construction and so on...

"In any case, you seem to be getting along quite well with Eric now. I feel truly relieved."

"My deepest apologies for causing your Royal Highness concern over such a trivial matter."

"Do not mind such a thing. I am just glad to see my friends and companions getting along. But, is everything all right?"

With that question, the crown prince tilted his head. Was everything all right? He was probably referring to the political and reputation balance and repercussions for me. Since he's probably heard stories about me as well, I suppose it's only natural that he would be worried.

"-that someone such as I was able to befriend Eric during our joint excursion, I believe it must be Misorua's guidance. Although I say this, the grace of Misorua's guidance has already exceeded what my body can handle. It would be arrogance on my part to desire more, as it would be akin to forcing a bent nail straight with a hammer."

Although my words were polite and formal, I basically told them rather bluntly through this that 'while Eric and I have resolved our disagreements, I don't intend to do anything beyond my ranking by associating with all of you.' The crown prince and Grays' expressions stiffened ever so slightly at this.

"...I see. You are as humble as always. Then I as well shall pray to Misorua for an opportunity to become closer with you."

CHAPTER 204

THE LONG, LONG PREQUEL'S CONCLUSION

Finally, winter came before long.

After the final winter semester exams, there was winter vacation, and all the students typically either returned to their residences in the royal capital or back to their parents' domains.

Before any of my classmates could see my returned test results with the teacher's comments that I had received the highest marks in the entire grade, I hurriedly destroyed all my test papers. While waiting for my horse-drawn carriage's arrival to come pick me up, Zephyr and I chatted a little in my free time.

“You’re going to be returning to the Kaldia domain?”

“Yeah. I still have lots of work to do as the domain lord. If it wasn’t for that, I wouldn’t want to return.”

“Surely you must be joking. You’re always so serious, Kaldia, that the truth must be you really want to return to clear up all the accumulated work.”

Zephyr chuckled at his own joke, while I merely shrugged as my lips relaxed.

To tell the truth, I actually didn’t have too much work piled up, as I took care of it already while I was recovering from my earlier injuries. Even though I hadn’t been in Kaldia for most of the past year, letting work pile up was something that I absolutely wouldn’t allow. I would always take care of it even at school, so it couldn’t pile up.

Zephyr seemed to understand this as well, so it was probably just a casual joke by him.

“How about you, Zephyr? Are you going to stay in the royal capital?”

“I’m also going to return to the Molton domain this winter. The journey is so long that it’s rather bothersome, but my younger brother Lucius is waiting there for me. Also... when Lucius becomes a student at noble school next year, I think I’ll have less chances

to go back to my home.”

There's still two more years left before we graduate. Perhaps Zephyr was planning on not seeing his homeland for the following two years, as there was now a wistful nostalgic expression in his eyes.

“...The Molton domain is really beautiful. The white Amon Albus mountains are near, so the rocks are also white, plus there's a colorful variety of wildflowers. I would love for you to visit me, and although it's annoying for me to admit it, visit my father as well as you're one of his best friends. It's really far from the royal capital though, so I suppose it would be difficult for you to accept? Even if I don't go back for two years after this, I'd still like to show you around there sometime after we graduate from noble school.”

I smiled as widely as I could while listening to Zephyr.

“The war is finally over. In two years, I think my domain will mostly have recovered fully. That's why I think it would actually be nice to take a nice relaxing vacation somewhere at that time. The first place I'd want to visit... I think a close friend's domain sounds like a great idea.”

“Wonderful! That sounds like the best vacation plan ever! Will you take me along with you?”

“...I don't mind, but how many months do you intend to spend on the trips between the Molton and Kaldia domains, then?”

Zephyr seemed shocked at my comeback and fell silent for a moment. Then, we broke out into laughter almost simultaneously.

The other students around us that kept a good distance from me all seemed to glance at us with annoyed expressions, but I paid them no mind and continued laughing together with Zephyr.

Even now, I can barely believe that I'm able to enjoy myself like this, laughing at a joke and having fun together with a classmate of mine. I never even considered the possibility when I first walked through the school gate here for the first time.

The number of people I could relax myself around were so limited in number. Apart

from Zephyr, there were only Ratoka, who knew almost all of my secrets, and Tira, Reka, and Athrun from the Shiru tribe, the children I lived together with in my childhood.

Despite the fact that we were both nobles, Zephyr seemed to have become someone I could relax and have fun with just like Ratoka and the others even though I've barely known him for that long compared to the rest. How inconceivable.

...As expected, was it because Zephyr's way of talking and joking seemed so similar to his?

Even though I could no longer remember his voice clearly, it seemed that bits and pieces of him still remained piled up in the bottom of my heart.



It was almost time for the heaviest snowfall of the year in the Jugfena region when Arxia's peace ambassador to Rindarl finally returned.

With the peace treaty finally having been completed and signed, the royal capital was incredibly lively this year even though winter was usually its quietest season.

Despite the fact that the royal army's victorious return had already caused a huge commotion, there was actually a second round of invitations sent out for yet another victory celebration. I could only smile blankly at this in amazement.

Arxia had set out many conditions for Rindarl to follow in order to achieve peace.

Slavery was banned. Rindarl receiving immigrants from the southern countries was banned. An upper limit was set for Rindarl's military expenditures. Furthermore, a tariff was established for Rindarl to trade with the southern countries. A large amount of compensation money was paid to Arxia by the Rindarl Union's ambassador to Arxia. Apart from these, there were also countless other conditions that we obtained.

Apparently in Arxia's "Royal Palace," the new prevailing way of thinking was that now with a country like the Rindarl Union that was as large and powerful as Arxia existing, having a non-interference policy was no longer feasible for Arxia. Even with conservative voices in the House of Lords strongly against the changes to Arxia's isolationist policy, Arxia still pressed through successfully with these demanding

peace conditions that were basically akin to pushing down someone's head against the ground.

In the long history of Arxia, this was the first time that we had ever "controlled" what was considered a heretic society.

Only a single Rindarl citizen came to Arxia together with our peace ambassador. This was information that probably even Earl Terejia didn't know yet.

Another one of the peace conditions had been for Rindarl to send a royal hostage to Arxia. The name of the girl chosen for this purpose was Emilia Yurie De La Rindarl.

She was both the princess of the former Rindarl Kingdom, and the daughter of the current Rindarl Union's Archduke. She was the only daughter of the Archduke from the former Rindarl Kingdom that had been set up as the puppet government leader for the four united Dukedoms-

– And she was also the heroine of a certain otome game in my memory, who potentially was a person that could wildly influence my fate, and cause my life to completely go off its tracks.



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